

# ***ACE OF DIAMONDS***

*A RED DIAMOND MYSTERY*



**MARK SCHORR**

# Ace of Diamonds

By  
Mark Schorr

## *Praise for Ace of Diamonds*

“Ace of Diamonds” runs against the current strain of precious P.I.s. Or, more accurately, it bulldozes over them....The dialogue spits out sharp and deadly, like the hot lead from Red’s .38. The pace is quick and the humor is topical.”—*The Register*

“A BREEZY, FAST-MOVING STORY. A rapid-paced novel of crimes and criminals, a psychological portrait of a protagonist with a double midentity and a parody of the whole genre of detective fiction....Refreshingly different.”—*Los Angeles Herald Examiner*

“If you liked Sam Spade, you will like Red Diamond, a schizophrenic private eye who thinks and acts as if he is back in the 1930s. Schorr has the dialogue down pat as Diamond bulls his way through Las Vegas leaving an impressive assortment of mobsters pushing up daisies.”—*Books of the Southwest*

“Marvelously engaging.”—*Newsday*

“More than a clever and wildly tumbling mystery...it’s a nostalgic takeoff of some of the best detective fiction and goes a gigantic step beyond imitation.”—*Dallas Times Herald*

“You won’t want to miss a words. Private eye literature will never be the same. Red, we love ya!”—*Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine*.

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For Emily and Ben who weren't around when this first came out, but have immeasurably enriched my life since then.

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## Chapter One

"I don't feel that we're making any progress," the portly psychiatrist said, gnawing the stem of his pipe.

"Why is that, doc?" the man on the leather couch asked.

"I'm not sure, perhaps it's because ..." The psychiatrist paused. "There you go again, asking the questions. I ask the questions. You probe your psyche for the answers."

"I don't probe my psyche. The last time I had my psyche probed was in the service, and the guy was wearing a rubber on his finger."

The frustrated doctor got up and took fresh tobacco out of an ornate cut glass jar on his desk. He tamped the tobacco into the pipe, dribbling a few bits on the carpeted floor.

"I've been doing this for fifteen years," the psychiatrist said. "Everyone has responded to some form of treatment. Gestalt. Jungian. Primal. Even Freudian. Your psychosis is deeper than anything I've ever encountered."

"Is something else bothering you, doc? You're acting like a guy expecting his first kid."

"Mr. Jaffe. We must come to an understanding. We're here to discuss your problems, not mine."

"I got two problems, and I told you about them already," the man on the couch said patiently. "I need to find my gal, Fifi La Roche. And I need to get my hands on a mug named Rocco Rico. Fifi I'm gonna marry. Rocco I'm gonna kill. Simple enough?"

"Mr. Jaffe, you must realize—"

"I realize all I gotta realize. And my name's not Jaffe. It's Red Diamond."

That is your problem. You are not Red Diamond. You are Simon Jaffe. You are not a private eye. You are a cab driver."

Diamond sat up, lit himself a cigarette, and stared skeptically at the doctor. He snorted, lifted his six-foot, 200-plus-pound body up, and headed toward the door.

"Where are you going?" the psychiatrist demanded.

"I got better things to do than listen to the same old story out of you. I been coming to you a dozen times and we always go running around the same track."

"Do I need to remind you that the District Attorney dropped the charges on those homicides in return for your getting counseling?"

"It was only a recommendation. The charges had already been dropped. And I was just coming to you to make it easier for me to get my ticket back."

"Ticket?"

"My license. Those bureaucrats up in Sacramento said they couldn't find any record of a license under my name. And shooting all those people didn't make me popular with the pencil pushers."

“What about the homicides? Do you feel any remorse?”

“The bums deserved to die. And I don’t like the D.A. Sending me to get my head shrunk after I was cleared on the beef.”

“Whether you like it or not doesn’t matter. You and your attorneys agreed to it. And I’m sure the District Attorney will be very displeased if I have to notify him that you’ve ended treatment.”

“I wouldn’t want to make the D.A. upset,” Diamond said sarcastically. “He might be so broken up he couldn’t run for the Senate.”

“It doesn’t seem so tough, your coming in and talking to me,” the psychiatrist said. He pointed to the couch with his pipe. “Please have a seat. You have fifteen more minutes.”

Diamond returned to the couch. He grumbled and sat down.

“Let’s confront the facts head on,” the doctor said. “You are forty-three years old, you agree?”

“And feeling every day of it.”

“Very well. Now you claim you began your chase of this Rocco Rico person in 1938?”

“Yeah. And I met Fifi the same year. It was a helluva time. Rocco was wearing a black silk suit, a white tie and a scowl. The suit was nice. His face wasn’t. Especially after I busted up his fruit cart extortion racket pretty good. He wanted his boys to bust me up even better. I showed them. They tried—”

“I’ve heard this story several times. Now the point is—”

“And Fifi. She was working in that club he owned. Called herself a chanteuse. A voice like a warm summer night. A body that sent the mercury right out of the thermometer. All the guys wanted her. Rocco thought he owned her. But then ...”

“The point is, if you’re forty-three, you were born in 1941. Therefore this supposed adventure took place three years before you were born.”

Diamond felt the throbbing begin. “Don’t try and trick me,” he said, pressing his hands against his temples.

“I’m not trying to trick you. I’m trying to help you. We must break through these barriers you’ve erected. Does your head hurt?”

“Just a migraine. Comes from going to a head-shrinker.”

“I want to help you but you keep resisting.”

The pounding was growing worse. Native drums beating while elephants jitterbugged on his skull. Get Johnny Weismuller to call them off. Diamond felt dizzy.

“I ... am...Red...Diamond.”

The psychiatrist hesitated as Diamond grew pale.

“We’ll slow down a bit,” the doctor said. “Let’s assume you are Red Diamond. Let’s try some word associations.”

The pounding was still fierce, but it had stopped getting worse. Diamond tried focusing on the plaques and diplomas that covered the doctor’s wood-paneled walls.

"Shoot," Diamond said.

The doctor took out a small notepad. "Green?"

"Money."

"Black?"

"Mail."

"Male?"

"Mail. Blackmail."

"Red?"

"Blood."

"Wife?"

"Beater."

"Home?"

Diamond paused and lit a cigarette.

"Home?" the psychiatrist repeated.

"Most accidents occur there."

"Family?"

"Feud."

"Car?"

"Crash."

"Love?"

"Death."

The psychiatrist sighed. "Your responses are extremely violence-oriented. Let's explore that."

Diamond had regained his composure. "No surprise. I deal in murder, mayhem. I do people's dirty laundry for them. Make sure it doesn't get hung out for the world to see. I'm a shamus. If I was a gardener I could tell you about petunias. Because I'm a dick I can tell you about twists on a bullet or how to kill someone so the coroner don't know it's murder."

"You call yourself a dick. Is your masculine identity tied up in your role?"

"If I call myself a private eye, you gonna think I'm a Peeping Tom?"

"You're asking questions again."

"They're better than the questions you ask. That's what I do for a living. I ask questions until I get the answers no one wants to hear. A great job if you like seeing people at their worst."

"Then why do you do it? Do you feel a need to prove you're better than everyone else?"

"I do it because it's the right thing to do. Half the time I don't even get paid. I'm there to make sure the system works. When the cops screw up and the bad guy gets away, someone's got to clean up the mess. I'm the guy that follows the horses in the parade and cleans up the stuff they leave behind."

"Do you see the people you deal with as feces?"

"You mean shit?"

"If you prefer."

"Some, yeah. Some are just decent people who stepped into it. And one of

these days I'm going to catch up with the horse that's making the biggest mess. Rocco. Then I'm going to stop him."

"How?"

"It depends what's handy. If it's a gun, I'll shoot him. A knife, I'll stab him. A club, I'll beat him. If there's nothing else, I'll strangle him with my bare hands."

Diamond's voice was low, but the vehemence made it sound like a scream. He held up his hands for the doctor to see. They were tensed and looked quite capable of the job.

The doctor failed to hide his distaste. "You're talking about murder."

"Do you call it murder when you step on a roach?"

"But you're talking about a man."

"A man who laughs when women and children die, a man who listens to screams like they was the best bebop. Anyway, you once said he was a figment of my imagination."

The psychiatrist fumbled with his pipe. "Yes, but still, I mean you—"

"Pull yourself together, doc," Diamond said, grinding out his cigarette in an ashtray while a smile played about his lips.

"You are not Red Diamond," the doctor said after a long pause. "Red Diamond was a character in cheap detective novels. Like Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade or Mike Hammer."

"They're all right Joes. They ever been in to see you? That Hammer guy could definitely use a little help. That Manning broad was in the same racket as you, so I guess Hammer might not be too trusting. Turned out she was the killer. I helped Mike out on that case back in 1947. He gets that book [i]I, the Jury[i] and I get left out in the rain."

"No. No. No. No. They don't exist. You don't exist."

"What do you mean I don't exist? Who are you having a conversation with? Are you talking to yourself, doc? That's a bad sign."

"No. No. I mean these fictional private eyes are not real. They're fantasies."

"I wish they were. Sometimes the competition's tough in this racket. And they get more ink than I do."

The doctor's chair squeaked as he jumped up. "Stop it! Right now! You are Simon Jaffe. You developed an obsession with this Diamond character. You had a traumatic experience find you became your fantasy character."

The throbbing began again.

"Your wife is named Milly," the doctor continued, waving his pipe and spilling smoldering tobacco. "You live on Long Island. You've got two children. A boy and a girl. You abandoned them and took off on—"

"Doc, they say I killed a bunch of people," Diamond said slowly through clenched teeth.

"Yes. In California and New York."

"Some real tough characters."



“Yes.”

“Then how come some dumb cabbie took on these bad eggs and came out in one piece?”

“You were lucky. You were nearly killed. I’m trying to help you.”

Diamond got up and walked to where the doctor stood. The P.I. ground the glowing tobacco embers underfoot.

“I know. You’re here from the government and you’re here to help me.”

“I’m an accredited, court-appointed psychiatrist.”

“You know what goes with that?”

“What? Court-appointed?”

“No, the saying is the biggest lies are I’m here from the government to help you,’ ‘your check is in the mail,’ ‘this won’t hurt,’ and ‘I promise I won’t come in your mouth.’”

The small digital timer on the psychiatrist’s desk made a few beeps and Diamond moved toward the door.

“Time to go,” Diamond said happily.

“Mr. Jaffe, we haven’t made any progress,” the doctor said petulantly. “I’m going to recommend we discontinue treatment. Perhaps someone else can be of more help.”

“Don’t bother unless you know someone who might be able to clue me in to where Rocco is.”

“There is no Rocco. There is no Fifi. There is no Diamond,” the psychiatrist insisted.

“If there’s no Red Diamond then there’s no point in wasting fifty minutes of your time,” Diamond said as he reached for the brass doorknob.

“Don’t you understand, you believe this so you can escape—”

“Speaking of escape,” Diamond said, opening the door.

A fidgety middle-aged woman, nibbling on silvered nails that matched her hair, sat in the waiting room.

“A nice-looking doll like you shouldn’t have too many problems,” Diamond said to the woman.

She blushed and bowed her head.

“Listen, go easy on the doc. He’s had a hard afternoon.”

“Mr. Jaffe, I don’t need you to tell my other—”

Diamond handed the woman one of his business cards.

“You see, my name is Diamond. The doctor has a fixation. Delusions. Reminds me of this case I had once. Guy going around saying he was the king of France. Tried to have me guillotined.”

“What happened?” the woman asked.

“I crowned him,” Diamond said with a wink.

She giggled. Diamond smiled. The doctor frowned.

“Go in and talk to the doc,” Diamond said to the woman. “Maybe it will help him.”

Diamond took his rumpled gray snap-brim fedora off the wall rack, placed

it jauntily on his head, and walked out.

He tipped the haughty valet who got his car a buck. The kid pocketed the money without acknowledging it.

Beverly Hills, bah, Red thought. He got in his Plymouth and drove back to Hollywood.

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## Chapter Two

Diamond leaned back in his chair, resting his size elevens on the chipped paint of the windowsill. He sipped cheap Scotch from a heavy tumbler. The sweet sounds of Benny Goodman's band flowed from the radio perched on the lone file cabinet. Blue smoke from his cigarette drifted up to the water-stained ceiling. The smoggy skies on the other side of the Venetian blinds were dark.

It was quiet now. The building noises had surged at five P.M. as hundreds of workers were disgorged from the twelve-story structure near the corner of Ivar and Hollywood. A couple of cleaning ladies and the arthritic night watchman would be the only ones going through the corridors.

It wasn't the kind of building where ambitious executives worked long into the night. If they had any ambition, they wouldn't be working for any of the companies in the Carlin Building.

Diamond had unwound after his session with the Beverly Hills psychiatrist. Seeing the shrink always keyed him up. It took a few belts of Scotch and some toots from Goodman's clarinet to get him back in the groove.

Not that the groove was so great. Diamond had been back in the business for eight months and had barely that many cases. He'd helped a woman find her long lost sister, cleared a guy falsely accused of a robbery, helped a storeowner catch an embezzling employee. Nothing to write home to the folks about. He'd already forgotten the details of the cases. The fees had been small, when he'd been able to collect. He wasn't good at squeezing his clients for bucks.

The phone rang. Diamond let it jangle a couple of times. Chances were it was a wrong number. He got a lot of wrong numbers. Especially when he stayed late on Saturday nights. His number was two digits away from Grauman's Chinese Theater's. Tourists who wanted to see if their feet were as big as Clark Gable's often called Diamond for directions. Most times he obliged them.

He set his drink down and wearily picked up the phone. "Diamond Detective Agency," he grumbled.

"Howdy. I'd like to chew the fat with Red Diamond."

"There ain't much fat. Just gristle."

"You Red Diamond?" The voice had an exaggerated Western twang. Red tried to picture the owner. A middle-aged-salesman type, probably drove a pick-up truck and lived in Fontana.

"I'm Diamond and I'm not buying any debuggers, new holsters, skip-tracing manuals, correspondence courses, or walkie-talkies."

"I'm not selling any, partner. My name's Edward Evans and I'd like to hire you."

"The Edward Evans?"

“Sure enough.”

“Is your refrigerator running?”

“What? I guess it is.”

“Well tell it to slow down,” Diamond said, crushing out his cigarette. “I’m not in the mood for jokers.”

“Neither am I, Mr. Diamond.” The aw-shucks Texas twang was gone. It was a hard voice, used to giving commands that were obeyed. “Look out your window.”

Diamond plopped the phone down on his booze-stained blotter, got up slowly, and walked to the window. He parted the blinds. Ten stories below him a long black limo was parked at the curb.

Tourists stood off to the side, trying to peer into the windows. The street people ignored the car, knowing that the days of catching a celeb on Hollywood Boulevard were long gone. These days, the fancy cars belonged to pimps and dope dealers.

“Do you see the limousine?” Evans said when Diamond retrieved the phone.

“Yeah.”

“That’s for you. My driver will take you to the airport. My jet will fly you here and we’ll talk. This is the type of matter best handled face-to-face. At worst you’ll get a free trip to Las Vegas.”

“And at best?”

The line went dead.

The broad-shouldered chauffeur wore a dark blue uniform with a diamond-shaped yellow patch on his right arm and a matching patch on his peaked cap. When Diamond tried to question him, the driver said, “I have to concentrate on my driving,” and clammed up.

The Lear 35A was parked on the tarmac at Burbank Airport. The driver walked Diamond to the plane, where two crew members wearing uniforms similar to the chauffeur’s nodded to their passengers and climbed into the cockpit. Diamond and the driver entered the passenger compartment.

There were four seats around a diamond-shaped folding table and a divan at the rear of the cabin. The driver walked to the back, stretched out on the couch, and pulled his cap down over his eyes.

“Fasten your seatbelts and extinguish all cigarettes during takeoff,” a voice said through the intercom.

Diamond lit a smoke and walked around the compartment as the plane took off. It was so smooth he only had to grab a chair for balance briefly.

He glanced in the diamond-studded mirror that covered the galley. A little baggy under the eyes, a little jowly under the chin, but not bad for a private eye who hadn’t had a paying client for more than a month, Red thought.

Business had been good when he’d first gotten out of jail. Because of the publicity, he even needed a secretary to fend off the wacky clients.

He’d turned down the divorce cases. Tracking pudgy businessmen to

seedy hotels where they'd make their secretaries work for a bonus was not for Red Diamond. When a marriage turned sour, it was uglier than year-old cottage cheese. And Diamond had no desire for a taste.

He'd turned down the industrial-espionage cases. Who cared if Amalgamated Grommet was stealing trade secrets from United Tang? Tang got it by screwing some inventor anyway. Diamond couldn't play the corporate kiss-ass games needed to make it with the large companies.

Bugging and debugging was a job for someone who liked feeling under toilet seats for wires. And skip-tracing usually meant collection work; finding out-of-work guys whose wives didn't know when to stop using the charge cards.

Marlowe or Spade wouldn't dirty their hands with those kinds of cases. Shell Scott or Chet Drum would just laugh. Race Williams or Mike Hammer would start busting heads.

Red Diamond was as good as any of them. Better. Half the cases those guys took credit for, he had solved.

The Garrett Turbofan engines roared quietly as the plane climbed to thirty thousand feet. Diamond swung open the galley door, retrieved a bottle of Chivas Regal, and took it back to one of the suede-upholstered seats.

There was a diamond design embossed into the chair. The wallpaper had a similar pattern. The six windows on either side of the plane were diamond-shaped. Through them he could see the wings of the Learjet cutting the cotton candy clouds.

Diamond took a swig of Scotch and set the bottle down on the table. There was a stack of papers on the flat surface. Whoever was running the show was too sharp an operator to leave them around carelessly. Red decided to play along and began leafing through them.

The top one was a full color brochure, the kind a travel agent would use to convince a customer that he or she couldn't live without going somewhere. The somewhere was the Ace of Diamonds Hotel and Casino. Twenty-one hundred rooms covering a hundred acres by the Strip. Five restaurants. Four cocktail lounges. Saunas, Jacuzzis, tennis courts, waterbeds, cable TV. The two-thousand-dollar-a-night Diamond Suite, home to celebrities and moguls. A casino big enough to park a 747 in.

The slick brochure haul photos of dazzling women in bikinis lounging by the six swimming pools, and suave studs in tuxedos gaming at the four baccarat tables. Everyone looked sexy, wealthy, and content.

Red remembered his cases in Vegas. The fat men in polyester blowing their savings as they looked down the flimsy dresses of the waitresses. The junkets of blowsy blond broads and the gigolos who convinced them they were as desirable as the chorus girls who were young enough to be their daughters.

Mobster Bugsy Siegel, who should've been honored with a plaque that said "Our Founder," instead was memorialized with Bugsy's Rose Garden at

the Flamingo Hotel. The joke was that associates and enemies who earned his wrath wound up as fertilizer for the roses. Real funny.

The whole town had the splendor and tackiness of a movie set. Caesar's Palace could boast it spent \$2.9 million on its swimming pool, using marble from the same quarry as Michelangelo.

Vegas was built on money and sex. Disneyland for adults. The big fantasy was that some worthless piece of desert real estate would become a multi-billion dollar boomtown based on making people winners.

Diamond took another gulp from the bottle. It seeped down his gullet like smooth fire.

Vegas was the kind of town Rocco Rico thrived in. A born corrupter. A Sicilian Fu Manchu. Responsible for more deaths than Smith and Wesson. Red could see the lights of the Strip flickering in Rocco's cash-register eyes.

And Fifi, what about her? The town would draw her like a beautiful blond moth to a flame. He'd found her there once, during what he thought of as the "Killer Casino Case." The dealer was equally adept at cutting a deck of cards or a P.I. like Diamond.

*He was cornered and he knew it. He had the kind of face only a mother weasel could love. His predatory teeth nibbled his lower lip.*

*I could've wasted him right there. Give him the same treatment he'd given the two nuns who'd seen his last murder. He deserved to die, or my name isn't Red Diamond.*

*He'd left bodies across the town. All I had to do was follow the corpses. It hadn't been a pretty trail, but no one ever said pleasant sights went with the job of being a dick. He'd spilled enough blood to fill the pool at the Sands.*

*And now I had him.*

*"It's time to talk," I said, keeping the .38 in my hand lined up with his gut.*

*"I got nothing to say," he whined.*

*I smiled and dropped the roscoe on the floor. He dove for it like an Olympic swimmer, and my gumshoe caught him right in the puss. A shiv appeared in his hand and he lunged for me.*

*I waltzed him around a bit. Arthur Murray would've been proud. The dance ended when I kissed his jaw with an uppercut.*

*"You feel like making with the words now?" I asked. "Like telling me where Rocco is?"*

*He got cute. It was almost as ugly as the last victim he'd carved up.*

*"What's in it for me?" he asked.*

*"You don't tell me and I give you a set of false teeth. How's that?"*

*He smirked and dove for my .38. I was getting slow. The punk got his hands on the gun. He started squeezing the trigger as I hit him. A bullet creased my arm.*

*I grabbed the .38 and began twisting as he kept pulling the trigger. Shots were going off like popcorn. He ate the last one.*

*Too bad. Life is tough. Death is tougher, unless you're an undertaker.*

That's the way Scott Marks had written it up, Red recalled, taking another belt of the Scotch. Marks was as good with the words as Red was with his fists. He forced the memories from his mind and shuffled through the papers.

Six of them were travel brochures for other casinos, similar to the first. Lush, colorful, promising more fun than a night at El Morocco. Gambler's Gulch. The Diamond Mine. The Lucky Cowpoke. Trail's End. Rugged Rock. The Mother Lode.

What they had in common was the small print at the bottom of the back pages, where they read "Owned and Operated by the 4E Corp."

Edward Evans Entertainment Enterprises.

A few sheets of typing on plain white paper gave Diamond an idea what the suckers had donated to 4E. The statements were public record, nothing that someone checking Nevada Gaming Commission and SEC records couldn't find out.

Evans was worth more than most millionaires dared dream about. He could buy a mansion the way Diamond picked up a pack of cigarettes.

Underneath the papers was a bunch of newspaper clippings. None of them were more than six months old. There was an analysis piece from the Wall Street Journal reporting that Las Vegas business was down sixty-five percent. It blamed the economy and Atlantic City, which was wooing away East Coast gamblers. Four stories were about fires of suspicious origin, including a disaster that killed eighty-five. The rest were about classic mob hits: men found in expensive cars with bullets parked behind their ears; care that blew up like Lupe Velez; a couple found hanging with picture-wire around their necks. The victims' names were unfamiliar.

The roar of the Turbofans changed and Red's ears popped as the plane began descending. He peered through the diamond-shaped window. The lights of Vegas glittered in the dark desert night. The landing lights at McCarran Airport had to blink hard to stand out.

"This place has better security than Jack Benny's vault," Diamond said as the chauffeur led him down interminable corridors lined with motion detectors and video cameras. They were buzzed through three sets of thick security doors with monitored sallyports, and Diamond was frisked twice by unsmiling, firm-handed guards.

The driver stepped up to a panel next to a knotty oak door and pressed his thumb against a metal plate. A red-eyed video camera winked down on them, a muted electromagnet hummed, and the door swung open.

The chauffeur waited outside as Diamond entered the inner sanctum.

"Welcome to my spread," a voice boomed. "The name's Ed Evans, but my buddies call me Tex." A giant figure unlimbered itself from behind an equally massive desk and thrust forward a hand that wasn't as big as a catcher's mitt. Evans was easily six feet six inches. He had a lean body and a

leathery face under a beige Stetson. He wore a Ralph Lauren cowboy shirt, with a cowboy lassoing a calf embroidered on the yoke. He had a leather vest and chaps on. His dungarees were held up by a broad belt with a plate-sized silver buckle. There were six-shooters on both hips. Diamond didn't need to look at Evan's feet to guess the kind of boots he was wearing.

"I see why they call you Tex," the P.I. said.

"Just a brand they hung on me out on the range," Evans said. There was a boyishly happy look on his weathered features. "Hope you enjoyed your flight in."

They pumped hands. Evans's grip was as strong and dry as a Santa Ana wind. Red decided he liked the oversized billionaire.

Tex moved back behind his desk and sat on the saddle—mounted on a wooden block—that served as his chair. "Take a load off your feet," he said, gesturing to a chair in front of his desk.

Diamond removed his fedora and sat.

The walls were covered with Western memorabilia: branding irons, spurs, barbed wire, Winchesters and Colts. There were original prints by Frederic Remington and Charles Russell.

While Diamond took in the scene, Evans got out a can of Bull Durham tobacco and some rolling paper. He nimbly tucked and twisted until two cigarettes were produced.

"Effie used to do that for Spade," Diamond said as Evans handed him one.

"They call them quirlys where I come from," Evans responded.

Diamond lit both of their smokes and the two men sat back and puffed contentedly.

"I figured this was some sort of joke when you first called," Diamond said. "It looks like the real thing, but I still don't understand. You've got a small army of guards. I bet there's no shortage of shamuses who'd jump through hoops for a retainer from you. And I don't believe you just picked my name out of the Yellow Pages."

"You're right about the Yellow Pages, but it was the name that did it," Tex said with a grin. "I got a thing about diamonds. I won my first cow in a poker game. A diamond flush, king high. Since then, I've played my cards right. And relied on diamonds whenever possible. Do you know there are eight detectives in the U.S. named Diamond."

"I know a Richard Diamond," Red responded. "Ex-New York cop, had an office in Hollywood."

"I don't recall his name from my list."

"Makes sense. I heard he retired a few years back. Married his secretary. A doll named Sam with thoroughbred legs."

"Whatever. The other investigators were unacceptable for a variety of reasons. And I liked your background."

"What do you mean?"

"Some people seem to think you're crazy. Living in a dream world."



Diamond felt himself tightening up.

‘It don’t bother me none. Lots of folks think I’m plumb loco. But I’m rich enough so they got to call me eccentric. When I insisted on buying two thousand acres by Blue Diamond mountain and setting up the Diamond Bar ranch, my financial advisors did everything but have me committed. So I fired them.

“Anyway, Mr. Diamond, I’ve got more money than Tom Mix had hats. I can hire anyone I want. And I want you.”

‘I guess your problem’s got something to do with those papers you left for me to read on the plane.’

Evans nodded. “Red, the mob is trying to take over Las Vegas,” the millionaire said solemnly.

Diamond couldn’t suppress a smirk. “That’s like saying the Commies are trying to take over Russia.”

Evans tongue darted around his mouth searching for a piece of tobacco that had gotten caught in his teeth. He juggled it on the tip of his tongue for a second, then spit it out to his left. It landed dead center in a diamond-studded brass spittoon.

“This town was built up by some outlaws that would’ve made Wyatt Earp break leather. Bugsy and Meyer and the Ma-fie-ah turned it into a boomtown and then tried to rob it blind. But we cleaned it up pretty good.”

Diamond snorted and dropped his hat back on his head.

Evans flicked his cigarette into the spittoon. It made a sizzling noise.

“By the early 1960s I was worth a half-billion greenbacks,” Evans said, “give or take a few. I been a gambler all my life. Oil wells, cattle ranches, real estate, and, of course, diamond mines.”

Diamond yawned and ground out his cigarette in an ashtray in the shape of, and nearly the size of, Texas.

“I became interested in Nevada. I wanted a state where I could expand, where the government bureaucrats wouldn’t be buzzing around like flies on a fresh cow flop. I saw the quote from Governor Sawyer about things being relaxed, tolerant, and mindful about folks going their way unmolested with a minimum of irritation. So I began moving my business out here.

“There was all kinds of varmints, men bad enough to make a preacher cuss. The local law was as crooked as a sidewinder with a bellyache. So I got the Kennedy brothers to put the squeeze on. At the same time I was offering the boys in silk suits good money to sell out. They did.

“It took more’n a dozen years but we pretty much cleaned up this town,” Evans continued. “Got some honest cops, judges that couldn’t be bought too cheap. Even a couple of legislators who could be trusted not to clean out the till at the orphan’s home.”

Evans paused and fingered the brim of his Stetson. “So what do the lowdown cusses do but open up Atlantic City.”

Diamond tilted back his fedora in a reciprocal gesture. “Tex, it sounds to

me like you're beating around the sagebrush. What kind of job do you have in mind?

You want me to blow up Atlantic City or start bringing tour groups to this town?"

"Red, I don't mind the competition. There's no way they can hurt Las Vegas legitimately. We're still known around the world as the best gambling town. You want to get gussied up like in some high falutin' European casino, we got the place for you. If you're just a regular cowhand and want to let off a little steam, you can do that too. Or if you want to go up against the one-armed bandits, we can make you happy. And our weather's great."

"I read the travel brochures, Tex. I'm impressed. Vegas is like a hooker. She'll take your money and screw you good no matter who you are."

Evans didn't appreciate the humor. "You know about the problems we've been having. The fires, the murders. That's just part of it. There's more street crime, more hotel burglaries, more cheating at the tables."

"Times are tough all over," Diamond said. "Go to any big city and you'll find more cockroaches crawling out of the woodwork."

"But this is organized," Tex said. "What I want you to do is find out who's behind it. Who had two of my key employees killed and ran off a half-dozen others? Who's bringing in the low-class hookers, the burglars, stick-up men, card cheats, con men, car thieves?"

"Vegas is just the kind of sweetheart of a town to attract them," Diamond said. "You got a large transient population and cops as used to getting taken care of as a baby at its mother's teat."

"No!" Evans shouted, slamming a ham-sized fist down on his desktop. "This is different. It's a conspiracy."

I spent enough time trying to talk this guy out of hiring me, Red thought. It wouldn't hurt to nose around Vegas a couple of days at Evans's expense. He could afford it. And the millionaire might have a point.

"If it's a conspiracy, there's only one man who could pull it off," Diamond said slowly.

Evans leaned forward. "Who?"

"Rocco Rico."

"I read in your file about him. Do you really think he exists?"

"As sure as Jesse James robbed banks."

Evans leaned back. "So you snoop around and see if you find him here? I'm asking for your help, Red."

"You got it."

"Whoowie," Tex yelled, jumping up. He took out both six-guns, twirled them, and then let off a couple of shots into the ceiling.

Diamond looked up, expecting to hear the sound of bodies falling. The ceiling was pocked with bullet holes.

"Don't worry partner," Tex said. "It's my way of letting off a little steam. The office is soundproofed and the ceiling is lined with batting like they use at

target ranges.”

“Glad you’re happy,” Diamond said, trying to remain nonchalant.

Evans glanced at the diamond-encrusted Rolex on his wrist. “I’ve arranged for you to stay overnight in our Diamond Suite. The staff thinks you’re a high roller from back East. Only me and Norris know who you are.”

“Norris?”

“My driver and Man Friday.”

“Ordinarily I’d say you should hire me through your attorney. That way I’m acting as his agent and get the benefit of the attorney-client privilege. But if the scam involves Rocco, I don’t know if there’s a lawyer you can trust.”

“I trust them as far as I can throw a Brahma bull. You got as many honest lawyers here as you got clocks in casinos. Let’s keep it just between ourselves. This is a gossip town. You’ll be amazed at how many people know all about you before too long. Or at least about this high roller you’re going to be. You got a moniker you want to use?”

“How about John Dalmás. My friend Marlowe used that name a couple of times and it seemed to work.”

“Dalmás it is then. Norris will take you to your room and give you any background you need.”

“Yeah. He was bending my ear all the way from Los Angeles.”

“He had orders not to talk,” Evans said. “Now that you’re on board, you’ll find he’s a straight shooter. He’s my eyes and ears. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to celebrate. Do you want to join me? I’ve got a Cisco Kid film set to unwind in the screening room.”

“I’ll pass. One last thing. I’ll be wanting a thousand a day plus expenses.” Diamond waited. The figure was five times his usual rate. But Evans was worth five thousand times as much as any previous client.

“Norris will arrange payment. I don’t bother with petty cash.”

“Sure. I feel the same way,” Diamond said.

Evans pressed a concealed button on his desk and the driver entered.

“This is John Dalmás,” Evans said. “Take him to the Diamond Suite. And give him full cooperation.”

Norris nodded.

“*Adios, amigo,*” Evans said.

“Hasty banana,” Diamond answered as he walked out with the driver.

The guards’ scrutiny was lighter as they left Evans’s quarters.

“Do these guys know who I am?” Diamond asked, waving a thumb as they passed the final checkpoint.

“They know you’re a valued customer who wanted to speak with Mr. Evans about extending your one-million-dollar credit line.”

“Did he?”

“Of course, for a high roller like you,” Norris said without any mirth.

“Not bad for a guy who can’t play strip poker without winding up a nudist.”

Norris didn't respond.

"Okay chuckles, tell me, who are the movers and shakers in this burg?"

"There's only a few casino owners who really have juice in this town," Norris said. "Eddie Mars owns a couple of places. Dave Palermo, Adam Dawson, and Mega Corporation own a bunch of others. But they're running scared. The only other real power is Moe Greenberg."

Norris said the name like a priest forced to utter a four-letter word.

"What about him?"

"He owns the Lion's Den, the Trojan Horse, the Ramses, the Sheik, and the Tahiti. The last two are downtown. Very lower class. Just like him."

"You don't like the guy?"

"I used to work for him. I despise him. He's a ruthless conniving ex-bookie who'd slit a blind beggar's throat for bus fare."

"No wonder he's a success. Tex said you could arrange things for me. I need a local contact. Is there a cop I can trust?"

"I believe so. I'll check."

"Also I don't have a piece with me."

"We frown on prostitution in the hotel, but I suppose something could be arranged."

"Not that kind of piece. A roscoe. A thirty-eight and some ammo."

"That shouldn't be a problem."

It seemed like they'd been walking for a week when they finally reached the private elevator that lifted them soundlessly to the penthouse.

"There's only one other guest on this floor," Norris said as the elevator doors opened. "A Mr. Vincent Van Houton. From South Africa. His family is almost as important in diamonds as DeBeers."

"His mother must be proud."

Norris took out a diamond-shaped key and opened the door to the suite at the right end of the corridor. "The suite is completely stocked. Everything you need should be there. If not, just ring double zero and I'll arrange it."

The door to Van Houton's room opened and two gaudily dressed women stepped out, laughing as they counted a sheaf of \$100 bills.

There was no reaction on Norris's face.

"I see you run a real respectable joint," Diamond said. "Good night, Norris."

"Good night, Mr. Dalmás."

## Chapter Three

There were seven white-shag-carpeted rooms in the Diamond Suite. The living room of the duplex had a bar to serve ten without anyone rubbing his neighbor's elbow. There was a giant television set with video game hookup that would have made an arcade owner jealous, a quad stereo system with recessed speakers, and a wireless telephone in every room.

Diamond knew from his past adventures that guests in the plush hotel suites stayed rent free. Either they were high rollers with six-digit credit lines or celebrities. Gold-framed, autographed photos of some of the hot shot previous guests covered one hallway wall. Sinatra, Wayne Newton, Tom Jones, Cher, Ann Margaret.

An inset Jacuzzi, big enough to float a submarine, was near the two-story window looking out on the bright lights of the Strip.

Diamond peeled off his clothes and plunged into the whirlpool. After a couple of minutes soaking with his eyes closed, he got up, dripped his way across the room, and retrieved a bottle of Scotch and his cigarettes. He flipped on the stereo and plugged in a cassette. Artie Shaw's trumpet tooted "Stardust." Diamond returned to the tub.

The lights blinked at him through the window, reminding him of the hundreds of cities he'd been in, the lonely nights spent in hotel rooms looking out at Times Square, Wanchai, the Tenderloin, the Sunset Strip, the Ginza, the French Quarter, the Combat Zone. He was destined to roam the underbellies of the tough towns searching for the lice that clung to the bottom.

He'd been shot at more times than Audie Murphy and hit in the head more than Jake La Motta. He'd helped Travis McGee when dope runners had tried to blow the Busted Flush out of the Florida water, and Spenser when the Massachusetts mobsters tried to run him out of town. When Johnny Milano and Miles Jacoby were jammed up in the Big Apple, they turned to Diamond. And Lew Archer and Phil Marlowe would admit he'd saved their lives from California crazies.

And what had it gotten him? A run-down office on Hollywood Boulevard that hadn't been painted since Grover Cleveland was president, an apartment in Los Feliz that was as homey as a bus station bench, a two-pack-a-day habit, and an empty feeling in his gut.

Fifi. It always came back to her. The blond bombshell with the mischievous blue eyes.

*The candlelight flickered off irises as blue as the Colorado sky. Her hair was the color of freshly harvested Iowa hay. The curves under her clinging sequined gown were as smooth as the Appalachian hills.*

*But underneath, her heart was as solid as New York bedrock.*

*Fifi La Roche had paid her dues. Her father had been killed when he*

*refused to pay tribute to a small-time mobster with big-time ambitions. Fifi had been the sole support of her sister after their mother ran off with a trombone player from Glenn Miller's band.*

*Fifi had worked as a cocktail waitress in some of the most dangerous dives in the country. It was at the Dew Drop Inn that she'd caught the evil eye of Rocco Rico.*

*He owned the inn, as well as a hundred other gin joints, topless bars, warehouses, opium dens, bookie parlors, and porno theaters. He could pick and choose from any of the hapless dames that fell into his clutches.*

*But he made a mistake when he chose Fifi. She had spirit. Even after he gunned down her sister, Fifi wouldn't give in to him.*

*Her heart belonged to one man. And that man was me. Which made me number one on Rocco's hit parade.*

*It didn't make him too popular with me either. We'd swapped shots around the world. I'd taken my lumps and dished them out pretty good too.*

*But Rocco was still around. And so was I. Fifi was out there somewhere, scared that if we came together, Rocco would take us apart. Permanently.*

*I wasn't about to let that happen.*

*Rocco had to pay for what he'd done. And Red Diamond was the guy who'd tally up the bill.*

That was the way Scott Marks described it, Red recalled. So it went in the P.I. racket. The dick dodged bullets and a guy at a typewriter got rich.

All the shamuses from Pat Abbott to Sidney Zoom. The famous names like Marlowe or Hammer or Spade. None of them got rich. Just the wordsmiths. Half the writers didn't even use their real names. Erie Stanley Gardner and John Creasey had more aliases between them than a pack of bunco artists.

Sometimes the eye don't even get his name in the book, like that guy that Pronzini writes about. People in the biz know his name but John Q. Public thinks of him as the "nameless detective."

So Dash Hammett worked as a Pinkerton for a while. Big deal. Why didn't he use the Continental Op's name, give credit where credit was due?

What the hell. Diamond lay back in the tub enjoying the heat and the alcohol and nicotine in his blood.

The scream woke him up.

He jumped out of the tub, wrapped a towel around his thick waist, and opened the door. There was another scream. It came from Van Houton's suite.

Barefoot and still dripping, Diamond hurried down the hall. A woman ran out of the South African's room as Diamond neared and she staggered toward him.

She was a well-built brunette in her mid-twenties. Diamond didn't have a chance to really look at her. A gorilla hard on her heels was less pleasant to look at, but a more immediate concern.

He was six feet four inches tall and nearly as broad at the shoulders, bare chested in black leather pants. The rippling muscles of his upper torso bore bullet and knife scars.

The gorilla grabbed the girl's long brown hair as a gaunt man in satin bikini briefs came out of the room. "WH" was embroidered on the blue satin. Pale and just over five feet tall, he carried himself like the King of Siam. He had long straight hair and a mustache the color of gold. A riding crop in his hand matched a welt on the girl's overly made up cheek.

"Let go of the broad," Diamond growled.

The gorilla looked back at his boss.

"Mind your own business," Van Houton told Diamond. He turned to his aide. "Bring her back in, Mike."

Mike tugged at the girl's hair. Her dark eyes were wide with fear but she talked tough. "Get your paws off me, you ape!"

Mike jerked and she yelped.

"You heard the lady," Diamond said.

As he stepped in, Mike let go of the woman and took a roundhouse swing at Red. The punch would've knocked him to Arizona if it hadn't been telegraphed from Reno.

Diamond ducked under the punch and caught Mike twice with short jabs to the abdomen that had little effect.

"Hit him! Hit him!" Van Houton screamed petulantly.

"Shut up, you little creep," the girl said, catching Van Houton with a blow that sent him staggering back into his room. The South African slammed the door, leaving the trio out in the hall.

Diamond turned at the noise and the slow-moving behemoth caught him by the neck and slammed him against the wall. He began choking Diamond. The P.I. landed a few punches that Mike didn't bother to notice. Things began to get hazy.

The girl reached from behind Mike and grabbed his testicles. She wrung them like a dishrag and the gorilla yowled.

With Mike folded over in pain, Red delivered a half-dozen knockout punches. It was a knee to the jaw that finally got Mike's attention and put him to sleep on the diamond-patterned carpet.

"Look what that asshole did to my dress," the woman said as Diamond leaned against the wall and enjoyed the clear passage of air into his lungs.

Her sea-green outfit had about as much fabric as a large handkerchief. Low cut on top and high on the thigh, the torn garment left nothing to the imagination about the slightly plump body underneath.

"Damn! This was my best trick dress," she complained. "Now I look like shit. Can I come in your room and freshen up?"

Without waiting for a response she marched past Diamond and down to his room.

He realized he was naked. No one had said anything when his towel fell

off during the scuffle. He pulled it out from underneath Mike and followed the girl into his room.

She was helping herself to a slug of Scotch as he shut the door behind himself.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Red. I mean John Dalmás.”

“Don’t worry. What’s the matter? You got a wife or something?”

“No wife. My name’s John Dalmás. Red’s my nickname.”

“How come? You’re obviously not a natural redhead.”

She looked down at Diamond’s clump of brown pubic hair, then smiled as he hurriedly wrapped the towel around himself.

“Don’t be embarrassed. You look like you got the right equipment. Want to try it out?”

“You don’t miss a trick.”

She broke out laughing and he joined her with a smile at his unintentional pun. They were standing near the living room bar and she reached out and squeezed his arm.

“I owe you one,” she said. “Would you like a free ride? On the house. And I’m good. That creep down the hall was supposed to pay me five hundred bucks for an hour.”

“That’s more than most politicians make.”

“Yeah. And it’s a lot more fun when I screw you.”

“I’ve had a hard day.”

“I can make it a hard night.” Her long nails doodled on his arm.

“I’ll pass.”

“That’s your loss,” she said in the same cheerful, professional tone. She stopped touching him. “Can I stay here tonight?”

“Don’t you have business to take care of?”

“Taking care of business is my middle name.”

“That’s a pretty long name. What else do they call you?”

“I like your style. My trick name is Patty Cakes. My real name is Teri Lennox. Call me what you want, as long as you call me.”

“That line was old when Mae West used it. What do you like to be called?”

“Teri.”

“Okay, Teri. You can stay the night. But I got to get something in return.”

“A quick trip around the world?” she asked with a knowing smile.

“No. Just talk.”

“You want me to talk dirty to you or are you one of those guys who get off hearing how I got into the sporting life and what’s a nice girl like me doing in a business like this?”

“Neither. Why don’t you freshen up and we’ll have a nice long chat. Have you eaten?”

“You mean food?”



“You gonna make everything I say sound dirty?”

“No to both questions. I’m starving.”

While Teri showered, Diamond phoned down for room service. He ordered the best the kitchen had to offer and a wine to match.

She was in the bathroom long enough to wash away a ward heeler’s sins. By the time she came out, wrapped in a diamond-shaped towel the size of a Persian rug, a big surf-and-turf extravaganza was being brought in on a silver cart.

The bellhop smirked at her while Diamond signed for the meal. He gave the kid a \$20 tip.

“You’re not famous, so you must be quite a high roller to get comped like this,” Teri said as they sat down to eat.

“How do you know I’m not famous?”

“I read People magazine.”

Diamond grunted and dipped a piece of lobster into the drawn butter sauce. It had exactly the right texture and taste. Soft but firm, with the barest hint of the sea in the glossy white flesh.

They ate in silence, washing down hearty mouthfuls with sips from the \$100 bottle of Puilly Fuisse. He could tell she was sizing him up and trying to figure out how she could get a chunk of his cash.

Diamond knew the \$20 tip, one fifth of all the money he had on him, was a good move. He had to keep the front up, ask the right questions without blowing his cover.

After dinner they sat on a couch that faced the window and polished off a second bottle of wine. Teri’s eyes were lightly glazed. The tension around her mouth seeped away with each sip. They sat for a long while in silence.

“I came here about five years ago to work in one of the shows,” she began. “Sweet and innocent. Fresh off the farm in Manhattan.”

Diamond’s eyebrows lifted.

“Manhattan, Kansas,” she said. “I had this guy promoting me. He made a whole bunch of promises. I had had the lead part in my high school play. Thought I was going to be a real star, you know, Barbara Mandrell look out. What a chump.”

Diamond nodded, encouraging her to spill her story.

“I was in the chorus line at the Treasury for a while. I really wasn’t very good. Then my boyfriend split, taking the little we’d managed to set aside. I was hanging around a casino all down in the mouth when a guy offered me fifty bucks for a date. It was easy after that.” She peeled her towel off. “I’ve got a great body, don’t I?”

“Yeah.”

She rose from the davenport with exaggerated sensuality, walked to the Jacuzzi, and bounced in. She beckoned him with an index finger.

Diamond dropped his towel and joined her. They leaned against opposite sides of the tub. She bobbed around, managing to brush against him several

times. He grew hard and she winked at him.

"Like me to take care of that?" she asked, indicating his erection and slithering her tongue across her lips.

"Maybe later. Have another drink."

"I'm not some high school cutie you have to get drunk to screw."

She was a lot younger and less experienced than she made out to be, Red decided. Her gestures designed to turn him on were overdone, like she'd gotten them from watching movies or looking at men's magazines. He took a swig from the bottle he'd left next to the tub. She took it from him and swallowed an equal gulp. The hot water bubbled around them.

"What do you want to know?" she said with a slight slur.

"Tell me about Vegas."

"Vegas sucks. Business is terrible. Low-life tramps on the street. Spreading syph and the clap. Rolling tourists. The johns are going to the ranches out of town. Some nights I barely make enough to pay for rubbers."

"When did it start?"

"About four, five months ago. Right around the time the Ultimo burned. That wasn't too great for business either. They busted some bellboy for it, said he set the drapes on fire with a cigarette. Those damn things are fire resistant. The whole thing stinks."

A ripple of fear rolled across her face, then disappeared as quickly as a two-digit tip in a maitre d's hand.

"I heard a bunch of guys got knocked off."

"Are you a cop?" she asked abruptly.

"You know many cops can afford a room like this?"

"Plenty in Vegas. You can't get a safe-deposit box in this town. They got them stuffed with cash."

"What about Evans?"

"He's a nut, but an honest one. Nuts about cowboys and diamonds. He's supposed to run a pretty legit outfit. Doesn't gyp the suckers and doesn't skim. But I hear he's getting squeezed."

"By who?"

She froze up again.

More wine, coupled with the soothing warmth of the tub and Diamond's gentle, insistent questioning, loosened her up. He had to lean in close to understand her slurred words. She rested her head on his shoulder and spoke slowly.

The street people believed the same theory Evans had voiced. The mob was up to its old tricks, using terror to eliminate the competition as they made their move to the Jersey shores.

Teri closed her eyes as she recited the evils that were befalling Las Vegas. The owners of four clubs on the Strip and three in the downtown area had already sold out to mysterious corporations. Evans was the last major holdout. If he gave in, the other independents would turn the town over to the

wise guys.

Teri passed out and Diamond carried her to the couch. He put a blanket over her and tucked her in. The makeup washed from her face, the muscles relaxed by sleep, Red could imagine the kind of girl who gulped a triumphant chocolate shake at the malt shop after a couple of curtain calls in the high school play. That probably was no more than a couple of years ago.

The alcohol had taken its toll on him but he couldn't sleep. Cleaning up Vegas might be the toughest job he had ever tackled. Bigger than smashing Rocco's multi-million dollar heroin ring or the white slavery operation that nearly trapped Fifi into a life of sin in British Columbia.

It would take time, time away from Los Angeles. That was the last place he'd seen Fifi. Though he wouldn't admit it, even to himself, every time the phone rang in his Hollywood office, he'd prayed it would be Fifi's raspy-honey voice on the line.

But she never called. She must be hiding somewhere, or else held captive, Red figured. The thought of her in Rocco's clutches made him gnash his teeth.

Who else but Rocco could call out an army of torches, hit men, hookers, scamsters and assorted mugs, pugs and lugs?

Diamond could feel Rocco's menace looming over the town like a satanic Goliath.

It was time for Diamond to play David.

## Chapter Four

Slightly groggy, Red peered out the two-story window. The gaudy splendor of the night before had been bleached out in the hot desert sun. The only sign the girl had been there was the scent of her perfume, which clung to the sofa.

After ordering up breakfast and using the toiletries in the bathroom, he rang up Norris, who escorted him to Evans's office.

"Why the tight security, Tex?" Diamond asked after passing inspection by a new crew of guards. "You been getting any threats?"

"A man can't be too careful nowadays," Evans said. "Some coyote took a couple of potshots at me a few months ago."

"You see the guy or got any idea who he was?"

Evans shook his head and changed the subject. "Norris said you wanted a shooting iron and a cop you could talk to."

"I got a question about Norris. He said he worked for Greenberg. Are you sure he can be trusted?"

"Did he tell you what happened?"

"No, but I guess there's no great love lost."

"That's for sure. Norris worked for him for three years. Got to the point where he was managing the dining room. The all-you-can-eat buffet."

"Yeah?"

"Norris used to let the old folks come in and sneak food out. Made like he didn't see them packing their feed bags. They were poor people and it kept them going. He told his staff not to stop them."

"One of the busboys snitched. Norris was fired, the busboy got his job. Greenberg had Norris blackballed and nobody would hire him. He was out of work for nearly a year when I took him on. He's been my top hand for five years now and I haven't regretted it one day."

"Sounds fair."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Drift around a bit, get the lay of the land."

"That Lennox girl last night wasn't enough?" Evans said with a smile.

"I don't like my business being broadcast."

"You're among friends. I told you word gets around. I don't reckon there's many people don't know about John Dalmas by now."

"That reminds me, if I'm going to be a high roller I've got to have some cash to flash."

Evans walked to his desk and took out a stack of hundred-dollar bills.

"That's fifteen thousand dollars. Just make sure if you go dropping it, you do it at one of my casinos," Evans said, reaching into another drawer and fishing out a .38, leather belly holster, and three boxes of ammo.

"The cop you'll be wanting to talk to is Lieutenant Frank Saint," Evans

said. "He's so honest I'd shoot dice with him over the phone. Not that he's a gambling man. Meet him at four-thirty out where Paradise Road hits Flamingo. Don't want to get the tongues in town wagging about your sitdown. There's a leased car waiting downstairs in the garage. Any questions?"

Diamond shook his head.

"Ride 'em cowboy," Evans shouted.

He was halfway out of the room when Evans let off a couple of rounds into the ceiling.

Diamond exited I-95 north and picked up scrap wood from an abandoned filling station. He pulled off a few hundred yards into the desert and put together a crude target.

For the next two hours he practiced firing. He never bothered to go more than ten yards from the target since virtually every shootout he'd been in was at close range.

He fired standing, crouching in police combat stance, and with arm extended. By the time he was done his hand was blackened with powder and sore from the effort of squeezing and the .38's polite recoil. But as he holstered the weapon he knew it was a friend he could count on.

He took a leisurely drive toward his meeting place. It was easy to enjoy the desert from inside an air-conditioned car.

As he neared the city, the Joshua trees were replaced by billboards. Murals of giant women, their skimpy bikinis bigger than his car; blowups of hotels as sleek as the women, but with fewer curves. Gargantuan head shots of Sinatra, Wayne Newton, Liberace.

Paris has the Louvre, Madrid the Prado, Washington, D.C. the Smithsonian. Las Vegas has the Liberace Museum, Red thought. He was no culture vulture, but a good investigator has to know about that sort of thing.

Like in the case of the Gibraltar Tercel. The dame had come to him with this story about the statuette and he'd checked with Herb Barber, the expert at the Museum of Natural History.

Barber had given him the history. Too bad Rocco had gotten to the smart little guy before Diamond had a chance to warn him. A museum guard had found Barber the next day, stuffed into the mouth of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. One more item on the bill Rocco owed.

A beat-up 1978 Chevy was parked near the intersection of Paradise and Flamingo. Walking about a hundred feet away was a man who couldn't be anything but a cop.

He was about five-eleven and two hundred and twenty pounds. The weight hung on a broad frame, but a lot of his girth was in his gut. He was wearing a loud green-plaid jacket that didn't quite match his green trousers. His eyes and hair were a steely gray.

As Diamond slowed the car near him, the man's hand scratched at his chest, his fingers brushing the butt of a barely visible 9mm in a shoulder

holster. Diamond kept both hands on the wheel and a friendly smile on his face as he pulled up near the cop.

He tapped the button to lower the window. The cop's hand stayed on his gun.

"Saint?"

"Diamond?"

"Hop in," Diamond said, and Saint did. Red made a U-turn and drove away from the city. After ten minutes, they found a quiet spot, and Diamond pulled off and shut the engine.

"Tex said you're working for him," Saint said tersely. "That makes you okay in my book. I find out differently, I'll be all over you. I don't like P.I.s."

"I don't much like cops," Diamond responded. "But I play straight. Tex said you could give me the lowdown."

"Lowdown is right. He said he told you already. The mob is coming back into town."

"Hard to believe they ever left."

"They figured straight guys couldn't make it work and they could take it back whenever they wanted. It didn't turn out that way. The wiseguys missed the skim and the money-laundering opportunities. You got more than twelve million people a year coming through here."

"And lots of cash changing hands."

"Right. When the mob wanted back in, they found Tex and a few others had more balls than they reckoned on. So they're trying to drive them out. Even if the straight players stay, so much business will be swung to Atlantic City it'll never be the same here."

"So why don't you do something about it?"

"I'm one guy. There's about a dozen guys on the job I'd trust not to steal gold teeth from a dead man. The Law Enforcement Intelligence Network won't even share information with our department. There's two detectives who do nothing but tail me."

Diamond checked his rearview mirror.

"Don't worry. I've gotten used to ditching them."

"Anything solid from your snitches or wiretaps?" Diamond asked.

"Forget about taps. As soon as we go to a judge, his clerk is dropping a dime to the wiseguys. The snitches come up with a half-dozen different stories. Mafia. Mysterious foreign interests. Martians. We're not getting anything worth diddly squat. No names to pin it on."

"Ever hear of a guy named Rocco Rico?"

Saint thought for a moment. "The name's familiar but I can't place it. What's he into?"

"Everything. I'm sure he's behind it. Who's the local hotshot?"

"Moe Greenberg. Also known as Iceberg. He's got a bunch of front men and corporations but they say he's involved. One of his casinos had a fire, but it only did a couple thousand dollars damage."

“Just to look good?”

“I think so.”

“I’ve heard his name,” Diamond said. “Where do I find him?”

“Under the slimiest rock,” Saint said, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a half-dozen mug shots. “Here’s some players I thought you’d be interested in.”

Diamond thumbed through the stack, committing each face to memory. The names would be etched in later.

“The guy on top is Greenberg,” Saint said. “The photo’s from a 1966 arrest. Conspiracy to commit murder. He beat the rap after two witnesses had car trouble. Their cars exploded.”

The black-and-white picture showed a middle-aged man with slicked-down graying hair and a Mona Lisa smile.

“The next two are the ones that do his dirty work. Washington Rogers, also known as Silky, and Vito Falanges, also known as Fingers. Both got rap sheets thicker than the Chicago phone book. They were thrown out of the Windy City mob for being too vicious.”

Silky was a good-looking black man with high cheekbones and an arrogant expression. Diamond studied his mug while Saint continued talking.

“Silky did something nasty to a young girl. He’d done the same kind of stuff before, but this one was an alderman’s daughter. Fingers set a fire that killed a priest and five kids at a home for crippled orphans.”

Diamond flipped to the next picture. Fingers was a sharp-featured white man who looked like a cornered ferret.

“Real cute,” Diamond said.

“The others are flunkies that handle different dirty work. I wrote the details on the back of the photos. If you need more info, here’s my card.”

“Thanks.”

“Let’s head back.”

Diamond started the car and pulled onto the road.

As they neared his car, Saint warned, “Be careful with your snooping around. These are real bad boys you’re playing with. I don’t need any more customers.”

“What do you mean?”

“I work homicide,” the cop said. The deadpan expression locked onto his face briefly flashed into a tight smile.

A few minutes after he dropped off the cop, Red’s stomach began sending messages to his brain. When he saw the classic diner, looking like a railroad car parked at the side of the road, he knew it was time to give in.

HOME MADE PIES EVERY DAY promised a sign in the window. The heat hit him with a blast as he hurried by the four cars and two red-and-gray cabs in the lot.

The air-conditioned cool inside was as soothing as a chilled beer. The stainless steel furnishings gleamed. From the shell-patterned wall behind the

grill, to the dozen stools, the metal looked hard and clean. The dwarf-jukeboxes found in diners across the country were perched on the counter and at the eight booths. But you could tell it was Las Vegas. There were almost as many one-armed bandits, their handles greasy from players trying their luck in between French fries.

Diamond sat at the counter. A napkin and silverware were set before him by a blonde who might've been a chorus girl fifty pounds ago. She took his order and relayed it to the sweaty Hispanic man working in the hot kitchen.

"Excuse me buddy," a man said, tapping Diamond on the shoulder.

His swarthy, pocked face was topped with curly hair as black and shiny as a colonel's boots. The man had a silver dollar on a pendant brushing his hairy chest. He nervously rubbed the silver dollar.

"Could you do me favor please and put quarter in slot machine?" The man held out a coin.

As Diamond reached for it, the man pressed the coin to his forehead, so hard it left an imprint of George Washington on the skin. He mumbled a few phrases in what Diamond guessed was Greek, then handed Diamond the quarter.

The Greek's overweight buddy was sitting at the far end of the counter chuckling. Diamond figured he was being set up for a practical joke but he couldn't guess what it was and decided to play along. He dropped the coin in a nearby bandit and reached for the arm.

"No. No. I do it," the Greek said. He wiped his hands on his trousers, mumbled again, and gently eased the arm down.

Click. The figures spun by. Apple. Lemon. Bell. Bar. Cherry. The machine flashed "Win! Win! Win!" as three cherries turned up through the glass. It noisily spit up a mound of quarters.

"Shit," the man at the other end of the counter said. "It finally worked."

The Greek threw his arms around Diamond and collected his money from the mouth at the bottom of the machine.

"Come, you must join us. You bring me luck. My name is Nicholas Papadokadis." He pulled Diamond down the counter with the feverish strength of a winner.

"I told you. I told you. See," Papadokadis said to his friend.

"My name's Bob Kincaid," said the fat man whose haunches hung over the stool. Diamond shook the fleshy hand he proffered.

"Papa's been stopping strangers for years," Kincaid explained. "He kept saying he'd meet a stranger who'd change his luck. It can't get much worse. How much you owe?" he asked the Greek.

"But no more. Now I have luck. I win it back, bring my family over. Buy a restaurant. Two restaurants. What is your name?"

"Simon Jaffe." It slipped out before Diamond had a chance to think, coming from a part of him he didn't know existed. As he wondered what it meant he got dizzy and grabbed the counter for support.



“Are you okay? You look sick,” Kincaid said.

Red sagged on his stool and gulped a glass of water.

“I heard of people getting sick after eating one of Ginny’s meals, but never before.”

“Aw, shut up,” the waitress said, setting a cheeseburger, coffee, and slice of pie in front of Diamond.

“I’m fine,” Diamond said.

Kincaid tried to grab the waitress’s hand. “You love me, don’t you Ginny?”

She shrugged his grasp off easily. “If you were ten years younger, one hundred pounds thinner, and had as much money as Onassis, I might let you kiss my hand.”

“It isn’t your hand I’d like to kiss,” Kincaid said with a leer.

“Slob,” she snapped and walked away.

Diamond dug into his food, trying to put thoughts of Jaffe out of his mind.

“We both drive for Speedy Cab,” Kincaid said. “What do you do?”

“I’m between jobs right now,” Diamond said. “I’m looking around.”

“I get you job,” Papa volunteered. “I am good friends with the boss. You can be driving for us right away.”

“What’s the deal?” Diamond asked. “Owner operated, lease, fleet?”

“It sounds like you know your way around,” Kincaid said.

Diamond gagged on a slice of pie. He was disoriented, a medium in touch with an unexpected ghost.

Kincaid studied him as he began speaking. “We’re fleet here. Total of four hundred cabs spread out in a dozen operations. There’s thirty-five at Speedy. You make fifty percent.”

Diamond had lost his appetite. He pushed the plate away and lit a cigarette.

“Some radio dispatch, not much hail business,” Kincaid continued, eyeing the leftover pie greedily. “Guys pick up extra bucks referring tourists to sociable girls. And you can work out a deal with the Marrying Sams.”

“The what?”

“Marrying Sams. The preachers got these storefronts for quickie weddings. They kick back if you refer people to them and sometimes the happy couple hires you as a witness. That’s the business here in a nutshell.”

“How is business?”

“Terrible,” Kincaid said. “You make more selling hot plates to Gila monsters.”

“Jaffe change that,” Papa said. “He bring luck.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Diamond said.

## Chapter Five

After promising to stop by the garage the next morning and exchanging farewells with his newfound friends, Red headed back to the Ace of Diamonds.

On the way, he checked into the Last Chance Motel under the name of Simon Jaffe. The dingy one-story complex, with two dozen rooms around an over-chlorinated pool, was a more plausible home for a job hunter than the Diamond Suite. He stopped at a K-Mart and bought work pants and a sport shirt.

He returned to the Diamond Suite and sent his suit out to be cleaned and pressed. He showered away the sweat and sand and called Evans on the house phone, arranging an interview with the chief of security, Ron Braun.

Braun had the build and warmth of a fireplug. He crushed Diamond's hand and made it clear he was a busy man.

"What can I do for you, Dalmas?" he demanded. "Tex told me you're going to be carrying a gun around here. I don't like it, but I gave my boys instructions not to hassle you. And I know what a tough guy you are."

"How's that?"

"I heard about your run-in with Mike Gregory."

"Who?"

"Van Houton's bodyguard. The ex-mercenary you laid out in the hall last night. We frown on that sort of activity. If I had my way, you'd be gone too."

"He's gone?"

"Him and Van Houton checked out this morning."

"I'm terribly sorry I hurt his feelings," Diamond said sarcastically.

"You should be. He makes a bad enemy. So do I."

"I'll remember that."

"So what do you want?"

"I carry large sums of money," Diamond said. "I've already seen what a great job you do keeping hookers out of this place. I wanted to make sure it was safe. I've heard about the trouble a lot of places have been having."

Diamond noticed a slight stress quiver in Braun's eyes.

"What have you heard?"

"Just rumors."

"Listen Dalmas, I was a cop for twenty-four years in New York. There isn't anything I haven't seen. I've got a hand-picked force of five hundred men under my command. I can take care of things."

"Good. I feel much better now." As the P.I. moved toward the door he said, "Say hello to Moe."

"What? What?" Braun asked, the stress tremor again crinkling his deep set eyes.

Diamond exited without answering. j

He took the elevator down to the main floor. The noise of chips clicking, slots jangling, roulette wheels spinning, and cards snapping, overlaid with the moans of losers and shouts of winners, hit Red as he stepped out into the main casino. It was about one-third full and decorated with the same diamond motif as the rest of the hotel. Diamond-shaped fixtures, diamond patterns on the wall, diamond designs in the carpet. The usual Las Vegas gaudy overkill. It was enough to make Diamond wish his name was Smith.

The casino was dimly lit, with each table bathed in a soft spotlight and every slot machine its own little glowing temptation. White-gloved old ladies sat at the slots, oblivious to their surroundings as they plunked quarter after quarter into the one-armed bandits. At the craps tables, men in conventioneer's fezzes shouted "Six the hard way" and "Be good to daddy" as they nuzzled the dice and bounced them down the green felt. The well-dressed men and women around the baccarat tables were quieter, pretending they were princes and princesses looking grand at Monte Carlo.

As Diamond sauntered past, he could feel questioning eyes on him. John Dalmas, high roller with a .38 on his hip, was making a grand entrance. The pit bosses' antennae vibrated.

"I think I'll start small," he said to the dame behind the cashier's window. "Give me ten chips."

"Very good, sir," the cashier said, accepting ten thousand dollars in cash and giving back ten brown chips with white diamonds embossed on them.

Red toyed with his chips as he passed by the row of crescent-shaped, green felt-topped blackjack tables. Small plaques at each one announced the minimum bet. The seven seats at each of the half-dozen \$2, \$5, and \$25 minimum tables were filled.

The hard-boiled detective could never go for baccarat. Get dressed up, bet before you see your cards, and hope to get as close to nine as possible. About as much fun as watching a one-armed mechanic rotate the tires on a sixteen-wheeler. Roulette and the slots were too mechanical. Keno was jazzed-up bingo. He'd never gotten along with dice. And poker was more fun to play with a few buddies and a case of beer.

Besides, Diamond had been sapped enough that the name blackjack had a certain appeal.

The dealer at the \$1,000 minimum table stood alone, arms akimbo, a slight challenging smile on his face. He had stern features and thinning hair. Four decks of cards were fanned out on the baize before him.

Diamond sat down casually and put his ten chips on the table.

With long thin fingers, the dealer collected the fanned out cards into a stack. He shuffled without looking at his hands, keeping his appraising eyes locked on Diamond's. After nearly a minute, he offered the P.I. the pile and a green plastic card. Diamond sliced the card into the middle of the deck. The dealer cut where Diamond had indicated and put the cards into the shoe at his left. Diamond put two chips into the circle painted in front of him and the

game began.

Diamond was no card counter. He had no system. All he did was draw another card whenever he had a diamond in his hand. He played with a casual boredom, his mind barely on the game.

He scraped the table, indicating he wanted a card, even though he had seventeen in his hand. The dealer hesitated, but flipped Diamond his card. It was a four.

Rocco was running around loose, Fifi was missing, and here I am playing cards, Red thought. It's part of the role, he knew, but he still felt rotten. Wasting valuable time. Playing with house money. A shamus acting like a shill.

Making it through the day was a gamble, Red figured. He didn't need to play games. The deck was stacked enough in the real world.

A cocktail waitress in a zircon-spangled mini-dress brought him a drink. He tipped her ten dollars. She had bleached blond hair, a nose that bore a plastic surgeon's touch, and pushed-up breasts. But nice legs that appeared to be the original issue.

The legs reminded him of Fifi. Legs that went from here to there and back again. Legs that could wrap around him and shut off the rest of the world.

The game continued. Diamond didn't bother splitting pairs, doubling down, or getting insurance. Simple, straightforward. He won most, lost some. He noticed a bead of sweat on the dealer's brow.

Fifi could be anywhere. Dealing cards, waitressing, running Keno cards, operating a switchboard in some back office where he'd never see her again.

But she was talented and loved men's eyes on her. A mutual pleasure. She'd want to be in the public eye. On the stage. In the chorus line.

Las Vegas was a city of two hundred thousand, but Red had found smaller needles in bigger haystacks. The total population was deceiving. In any city there are hundreds of communities. Not geographic areas, but occupational, socio-economic, sport, enclaves.

To find a missing stamp collector, go to a philately society. A doctor, call the medical association. A jockey, the race track. Even if a fugitive gave up his or her profession, they'd return to familiar stomping grounds. Like the lawyer Diamond had found working in a gas station in Milwaukee. The ex-attorney had blown his cover by becoming a court buff.

What better place to look for a raving beauty like Fifi than in the Las Vegas floor shows? And chorus girls were as chummy and gossipy as any other people. If anyone would know where his beloved Fifi was, it would be the women who danced and sang for their supper.

Diamond pocketed a dozen of his chips, and flipped the dealer his thirteenth.

"For good luck," he said and slid away from the table.

Without a glance back, he headed to the cashier's cage. As he cashed in his chips, a man standing at the back of the cage let himself out and came

over. Balding, with tufts of brown hair and a thin brown mustache, he extended his hand.

"My name's Slim Vogel," he said with an artificially sincere smile. "I'm the hotel's courtesy officer. You're John Dalmás."

"That's what my driver's license says."

"Are you enjoying your stay? Is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah, come to think of it. I wonder if I could get a tour of this place?"

"No problem. What would you like to see?"

"How about backstage at the show?" Diamond said with a properly lecherous tone. "I've heard you have some of the best-looking dames in the world."

"An excellent choice," Vogel said, throwing his arm across Diamond's shoulder. "Come with me."

They walked out through the casino and Vogel launched into a well-practiced spiel.

"We get more than one hundred thousand people a week coming through here. More foot traffic than the busiest railroad station. Our casino's bigger than a football field. And it has a lot more action. We have more currency transactions than the Bank of America. And we burn enough bulbs here and in the display outside to light up the city of Des Moines."

Diamond put on a suitably impressed expression. They edged through the milling crowds to a metal service door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

Vogel opened the door with a key and they entered.

"Not many outsiders get to see this. Only staff and our most favored guests. This corridor here leads to our 'Eye in the Sky' monitoring rooms," Vogel said, gesturing to a hallway.

"How many people have access to it?"

"The 'Eye in the Sky' allows us to monitor dealers and...What did you ask?"

"How many people can get back there?"

"That's a strange question."

"I'm a strange guy."

Vogel stopped and plucked at his mustache as he thought. "Oh, I guess a couple hundred. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

They continued down the hall, passing workers wheeling carts loaded with food, linens, and assorted hotel supplies.

"Our kitchen is down here," Vogel said, gesturing off in another direction as food smells drifted to them. "We serve over twelve thousand eggs a day and ten thousand pounds of shrimp. Besides our five restaurants, we have room service available in all twenty-one hundred rooms and snacks in our four cocktail lounges."

"You're full of facts and figures, aren't you?"

"Thank you," Vogel said. "If you like figures, wait 'til you see our

showgirls. Anyway, the hotel cost a hundred fifty million dollars to build and that was back in ... “

As Vogel babbled on, they passed a man in a bellhop's jacket wheeling a handtruck laden with metal cans. The ferret-faced bellboy looked familiar but Diamond couldn't recall where he'd seen him. The man showed no sign of recognizing Diamond.

“... One hundred thousand square feet in our shopping arcade,” Vogel was saying as they came to the end of the cinderblock corridor. Diamond dismissed the bellboy as someone he'd seen around as Vogel swung open another metal door.

The purified air smell of the corridor was replaced by a wave of perfume, sweat, and female odors. They stepped into the showgirls' lounge. It was a brightly lit, mirrored room with a half-dozen couches and women in various states of undress. None of them made any move to cover up as the men entered.

Vogel was clearly enjoying the view and Diamond's embarrassed expression. Red felt like a lion in a herd of wildebeest, not sure how to react to the appealing flesh circulating around him. The mirrors multiplied the effect of the breasts, buttocks, and thighs. Sequins, spangles, bangles, feathers, and generous lengths of female skin were everywhere.

“These are the Diamondaires, the most talented group of females in Las Vegas,” Vogel said. “And some of them can dance too.”

A redhead with small breasts and taut legs gave Vogel a punch in the shoulder. “Introduce your friend,” she said.

“This is John Dalmas, a guest in our Diamond Suite,” Vogel said.

The women made cooing noises.

“Are you as good with the ladies as you are with the cards?” Vogel asked Diamond.

“Only if I can cut the cards first,” Diamond said.

He was rewarded with a few giggles.

A tall black woman with mahogany-colored skin entered and frowned at Diamond and Vogel. She had short cut hair and a muscular, but womanly, body. At her side was one hundred pounds of muscle disguised as a Samoyed. The dog stalked over to Diamond, sat down in front of him, and bared his fangs.

“Cute puppy,” Diamond said, standing motionless. “Has he killed anyone today?”

The black woman strode over and stood behind her dog. “Bart don't like strangers.”

“He's not going to make many friends like that,” Diamond said as the dog continued to sneer.

“It's okay, Rosie,” Vogel interjected. “John is a friend of the house. Don't be so protective.” The courtesy officer turned to Diamond. “I've got to get back to the cage. I'll leave you in these ladies' capable hands.”

"I'll take good care of him," the redhead said.

"Just don't keep him away from the tables too long," Vogel said with a wink. He opened the service door and disappeared into the hallway.

"What you want?" Rosie demanded of Diamond.

"How about giving Fido a bone so he stops eyeing my leg like he wants to take it out and bury it?"

"Bart! Place!" Rosie said, and the dog regretfully moved to a small rug on the far side of the room. He kept a hungry eye on Diamond.

"The girls go onstage in a few minutes," Rosie said. "They don't got time to be flapping their lips."

"Are you the house mother?" Diamond asked.

"She's just a mutha," one of the showgirls said.

Rosie swiveled her head quickly but didn't catch the one who'd said it.

"My job is keeping lowlifes from bothering the ladies. Me and Bart keep these sweet young things safe."

"They look like they can handle themselves," Diamond said.

The redhead looped her arm through Diamond's. "I'm Angie. And you can handle me however you want."

"Are you ready to go on?" Rosie asked Angie.

"You think I dress like this to do the laundry," Angie snapped. She was wearing a sequined G-string and pasties with tassles hanging from them. She had blue plumes coming off her rump and head. "I'm not on until the third number anyhow."

"Rosie, I need a hand with this strap," one of the women at the other side of the room said.

With a glare at Diamond as hostile as her Samoyed's, Rosie stormed away.

"That's my friend," Angie said, indicating the woman who'd asked for help with the strap. "She knows when to get Rosie out of my hair."

Women drifted out of the room toward the stage area. The band began to play. Soon Diamond, Angie, and two other women were in the lounge. The other women sat on a sofa gossiping while filing their painted toenails.

Red knew he could get more from one-on-one questioning than he would if he asked the roomful of women. He put his arm around Angie, squeezed her shoulder, and led her to a corner away from the toenail trimmers.

"You got a powerful grip there," Angie said. "I bet you could crush a little gal like me."

"Angie, you're cuter than a pet shop full of puppies, but I'm looking for a particular lady."

"Oh." She stiffened.

"But I'd be real grateful to whoever told me where she was. Her name's Fifi La Roche."

"How grateful?" she asked, her flirtatious manner replaced by a cagey tone.

"A C-spot grateful."

"We're talking a cecil? A hundred bucks?"

"Crisp and green."

"You must really love her," Angie said. "I don't know the name. What's she look like?"

"She's a blonde. Early thirties. About five and a half feet tall. Hundred and twenty pounds. Blue eyes."

"If you want you can order girls like that by the dozen."

"But Fifi's different. Her hair is like gold, her eyes so blue you want to swim in them. And she's got the kind of body men kill for."

"I bet music plays when she enters the room," Angle said. "You're a real poet but your description doesn't help. Every time they have a cattle call here, you get a couple hundred girls that could fit the bill. I'd like the money, but I can't finger her for you. If you'd like a redhead, however ..."

Finger. Fingers. Diamond plunged his hand into his pocket and grabbed the mug shots. Fingers. Vito Falanges, ex-Chicago hood. That's who the bellboy had been.

"Hey. What gives?" Angie asked.

Diamond spun and jerked at the locked service door. It didn't budge. A quick look at the hardware and he knew he couldn't batter it down or open it without a pick set.

"Quick, how can I get back in the hall?" he asked, grabbing the bewildered Angie.

"The only way out is through that door," she said, pointing to the door to the stage. "But you can't go—"

Diamond was barreling toward the stage before she finished her sentence. He ran into the wings. A thickset man wheeling a prop chest tried to stop him but he shoved the man aside.

"Hey, you can't go out th—" a security man shouted. But he didn't move quick enough. Diamond pushed through a heavy curtain.

Several thousand watts of light hit him, freezing him momentarily in place. The security man grabbed for his arm and Diamond began moving again.

The band was playing *Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head*. The chorus girls, wearing translucent droplet costumes, were kicking. Diamond ran between their flying legs. Three women fell over trying to avoid kicking him. He stumbled over one well-shaped leg and got kicked by two others. The band kept on playing and the audience roared with laughter.

But when he made it through the gauntlet Rosie was waiting with anything but a smile on her face.

"You stupid bastard! You ruined the—"

"Listen and listen good. I've got to talk to Tex. It's an emergency."

Rosie hesitated.

Diamond took out his gun. "If you don't hurry, I'm going back on stage



and start shooting this thing in the air.”

“There’s a house phone on the post,” she said, backing toward it. She walked to the wall box and lifted the phone. “What’s going on?”

“No time to explain. Just get me Tex.”

“He don’t answer the phone for no one,” she said, handing the receiver to Diamond.

It took thirty seconds for Evans to get on the line.

“This is Red. I saw one of Moe Greenberg’s boys in the service corridor a few minutes ago. Does he have any business being here?”

“Who?” Tex asked.

“Vito Falanges. Fingers.”

“Hot damn no! That polecat makes Billy the Kid—”

“No time. He was heading to the casino area from the corridor backstage. What’s there that he could hurt?”

“Everything. There are doors to the basement, the spotting rooms, kitchen, storage rooms. It’s like a maze.”

Diamond glanced over at Rosie. She was staring at him wide-eyed. He covered the mouthpiece of the phone.

“Do you have a key to the service corridor?” he asked her.

“Yes.”

“How’s Bart on tracking?”

“He can do it.”

Diamond put the phone back up to his mouth. “I’m going to hunt for him with Rosie and her dog,” he said. “If you don’t hear from me within fifteen minutes, you start evacuating the place. Got it?”

“Sure do,” Tex said.

Diamond hung up. “Let’s go.”

“But we got a full house,” she said. “I can’t just leave.”

“You’ve got to trust me. There’s no time to argue. Fingers is a torch. I saw him with a bunch of fluid cans. Do you understand what that means?”

She nodded.

“What’s the quickest way to the corridor?”

“The audience seemed to like your act last time,” she said with a grim smile.

Diamond and the woman ran back across the stage. This time he only got kicked once. And Rosie deftly avoided the fast moving feet of the thoroughly confused chorus line. The crowd loved it.

As the P.I. ran into the girls’ lounge, Bart put the snarl back on his face. But he kept his distance. Rosie hurried to the service door and opened it.

“Come,” she yelled, and the dog ran to her side.

Stepping into the hall, Diamond offered his .38 to Rosie. “You know how to use this?”

She shook her head.

“Aim it at the center of the target. Keep both arms out in front and point.

Don't lock your arms. Squeeze the trigger slow, don't jerk it. It's simple to shoot. Once you decide to do it, empty the gun. Stay calm. And make sure it's not me in the sights."

She took the gun awkwardly and Diamond ran to the stairwell. "Anybody up there?" he shouted. His voice echoed off the hard walls. There was no response.

"Send Bart up," Diamond said.

"Bart, search!" Rosie commanded, and the white Samoyed took off up the stairs. They counted him bounding up three flights before Diamond had Rosie call him back.

"I've handled a few arson cases," Diamond said as the dog ran to them. "Heat rises. The pros usually go for the stairs or the basement."

"The basement is this way," she said, and they ran further down the hall.

Red opened the cellar door. The smell of fresh linen and a variety of stored foodstuffs came to his nostrils. But the scent that got to him was the pungent odor of gasoline.

"No smoke yet," Diamond said, breathing heavily from the exertion. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

"Don't shoot unless it's necessary. If a slug sparks off the metal, we could do fingers job for him."

"Okay. Be careful," she said reflexively.

He smiled, and they descended the metal stairs. The only sound was the click-click of the Samoyed's nails on the metal tread. When they reached bottom, Diamond whispered, "You hide over here. If he gets past me, shoot him. He's a killer."

"I understand."

"Will Bart obey me? We haven't exactly hit it off."

Rosie knelt and put her face by the dog's. "Give me your hand," she said to Diamond.

The P.I. extended it reluctantly. The dog still looked hungry.

"Bart, friend," she said, putting Diamond's hand to the Samoyed's nose.

The dog opened his mouth and licked Diamond. The canine's fluffy tail wagged.

"Let's go Bart," Diamond said, and they moved to the far wall where a half-dozen metal conduits were blocked by a stack of cartons.

Diamond spotted a crowbar lying on a wooden crate. He picked it up, hefted it, and moved on. The dog looked at him like they were about to play fetch.

They moved cautiously around the warehouse-size basement. The gasoline smell grew stronger. The dog sneezed.

They came to a stack of cartons. FLAMMABLE was stamped on each box. They could hear movement on the other side of the eight-foot-high, and twice as wide, stack. The Samoyed's white fur seemed to stand on end as his

hackles went up. He looked at Diamond for direction.

“Search,” Diamond said. Bart seemed to be smiling as he set off in a stealthy, hunter’s prowl.

Diamond waited, the crowbar poised above his head. He breathed in and out. The stench of gas filled the air.

A man screamed, and Fingers came staggering around the corner of the cartons. He was trying to pull his gun out with his left hand while one hundred pounds of Samoyed was turning his right into chopped meat. He drew his gun and was shoving it into Bart’s rock-hard belly when Diamond brought the crowbar down on his head. Fingers fell to the floor and Bart let go. The dog walked over to Diamond and licked his hand.

## Chapter Six

The cops came and took statements from Diamond and Rosie. The only statement Fingers made was a sad moan. Bart looked pleased with himself.

As firefighters vacuumed up gasoline and spread foam, Norris materialized and escorted Diamond to Evans, who was waiting in a locked broom closet.

"I don't like crowds," Evans explained as he and Diamond huddled amid mops and cleaning gear. Norris stood guard outside.

"I heard what happened," Evans said. "Partner, you already earned your keep. And then some. The Fire Department boys said there was enough to make us go up like a Comanche fire arrow. I'm mighty pleased you're on my side."

"The dog did most of the work. And Rosie's a pretty ballsy lady."

"I reckon so."

"I met your security chief. I wasn't very impressed. This shows I was right. I think you should give Braun another job, or the boot."

"Would you take over?" Evans asked, chomping enthusiastically on a chew of tobacco.

"I've got too much to do," Diamond said, thinking of Fifi. "But I bet Rosie could handle it. I know she'll run a tight ship."

Evans thought for a moment, punctuating the silence by spitting into one of the pails. As his shot pinged off the side, he said, "I bet you hit on something there, fella. The sun's coming up on Las Vegas. With Fingers in the hoosegow, there's bound to be a whole lot of pressure on the guys in black hats."

"I got a feeling you're seeing the opening shots in a range war," Diamond said.

He slipped out of the closet and took the elevator to his suite. He relaxed with a Scotch and a cigarette while reviewing the mug shots.

Fingers should be a guest of the government, at least for a while, Red thought. If the cops were able to get anything out of him, it could crack the case wide open. Fingers drops a dime on Greenberg, Greenberg gives up Rocco, and Diamond gets Fifi.

Red didn't believe in the Easter bunny and he didn't believe it would go that easy. Greenberg's money and muscle gave him more juice than Sunkist. Fingers would keep his mouth shut.

Diamond skipped the pictures of Greenberg and Silky. He had them committed to memory. Fingers photo he put off to one side. That left Babe McCloor and Freddie DeFilippo, also known as Flip.

Babe was a three-hundred-pound mountain with a thick black eyebrow that stretched from temple to temple. He looked like he could slip into a Neanderthal cave and mingle unnoticed. Seventeen arrests, mainly assault,

and as dumb as he looks, Saint had penciled on the back.

Flip was a greasy-haired lounge lizard with a sensual, mean mouth. The type who thought himself a real lady-killer. On the back of the mug shot, Saint noted that he was indeed a lady-killer, having married a heiress and then running her down with her down with her own Rolls Royce. The cops had gotten wise, and instead of an inheritance, Flip got ten years in the slammer.

Flip and Babe were a two-man team. Flip managed Greenberg's prostitution rings and Babe kept order.

There was a knock at the door. Diamond walked over and swung it open.

"I came to return this," Rosie said, holding out his .38. "Thank God I didn't have to use it. Can I come in?"

Diamond stepped aside and the woman and the dog entered. Bart marched over to the couch, jumped up, and promptly went to sleep.

"It's been a long day," Diamond said, holstering his gun.

"You're telling me. Tex offered me the job as head of security," Rosie said sadly. "He said it was your recommendation. Thanks."

"You don't sound too thrilled."

"I'm not taking it," she said, lowering herself into one of the chairs. "I've got a few hundred saved up. I'm leaving."

"Why?"

"You don't know this place the way I do. It's a different world. There's hundreds of dudes who will off me just so Moe will give them a nod. I don't know where you're from, but you ought to take my advice and go back there."

"I never backed down since the doctor slapped my butt as a baby."

"You ain't seen what I have, John. You may be a big gambler, but you don't know the game you're playing in. I'm clearing out."

"It's your decision. Is there anything I can do?"

"Can I stay here tonight? I'd feel safer."

"Sure."

"Don't get me wrong. I sleep alone," she said with some of her old spark. "I don't shack up with a dude less I really know him."

"I don't shack up with guys even after I know 'em for years," he said with a smile. "I'll take the couch, if Bart will share it."

They both looked at the dreaming dog, who was flicking his paws and making little whining noises. It was the only sound in the room.

"I'll take the couch," Rosie said. "I'm used to sleeping with Bart."

"Lucky dog."

She gave him a weak smile. "I'm really tired," she said, droopy eyed. She pointed at his crotch. "Do you mind leaving that with me?"

He looked down at his fly.

"The gun," she said.

"Oh." He thought of the Army chant, "This is my rifle, this is my gun. One is for shooting, the other for fun," but said nothing. He took the .38 in the belly holster out and put it on the end table next to the divan.

“Thanks,” Rosie said. She walked to the couch and shoved in behind Bart. The dog grumbled and barely opened his eyes. She was asleep before Diamond shut the light.

Diamond went to the bedroom with a bemused expression on his face. The second night in a row he had a woman sleeping in his suite and the relationship was platonic.

It hadn’t always been that way. In his prime, he could outdo Shell Scott, Mike Shayne, Timothy Dane, or any Don Juan dick in the sack. During his cases, he’d picked up secretaries, waitresses, embittered divorcees, women lawyers, switchboard operators, gal reporters, gun molls, and nurses. A dirty job, but someone had to do it. He’d broken dozens of cases by taking advantage of pillow talk. But then he’d gotten involved with Fifi and it just wasn’t the same.

*]Fifi, and me checked into the small motel on the outskirts of the dry Texas town. Our clothes were torn from the car crash, after Rocco’s thugs had tried running us off the road.*

*With a couple of slugs from my gat, I sent them on the highway to Hell.*

*The palsied gent behind the motel desk grinned at our shabby look, but Andrew Jackson convinced him we were all right. We signed in as Mr. and Mrs. Chandler Raymond. Most of the other entries were from the Smith family.*

*We went to our room and locked the door. Fifi’s perfume mingled with the stuffy, mildewed odor of the sparsely furnished room.*

*“Listen dollface, maybe I should ...”*

*“Not now, you fool, kiss me,” she said and gave me her lipstick to taste.*

*I pressed hard on her lush lips and they opened. She ground into me until the throbbing of my lust felt like a balloon about to bust.*

*I picked her up and carried her to the swaybacked bed. Our clothes disappeared and I was on her and in her and with her. It was like never before. And even better a half hour later when I entered heaven again.*

*The night was a blur of passion, building to crescendos, peaking, and then building again. It only got better.*

*By the time the sun came up, I decided I never wanted to leave the motel room.*

How the heck did Scott Marks know every intimate detail, Red wondered. It was like he had the room bugged; he even knew what Red was thinking.

Diamond didn’t believe in psychics. He’d busted up too many scams—like the time Gabrielle Leggett got mixed up with those wackos in Frisco—to fall for that hokum. But Marks did seem to be a mind reader.

The Ameche rang three times before Diamond slipped out of his reverie.

“Dalmas?” a smarmy voice said when he picked up.

“Who’s this?”

“I got someone wants to talk to you.”

Diamond heard a scuffling sound and then a terrified woman’s voice.

“John. This is Teri Lennox. Please help me. They—”

More scuffling and the smarmy voice was back on the line.

“I want to see you,” the man said. “Take Tropicana out past Jimmy Durante Drive. Make a left when you see the dirt road. Get over here right away or the girl dies.”

“Who is this?”

“Just so you know we’re not kidding around,” the voice said. There was a woman’s scream through the phone, so strong it made Diamond’s ear hurt. There was no question it was real. It sounded more like a hurt animal than a human.

“You harm the girl and you’ll pay.”

“Tough talk,” the man said smugly. “You’re in no position to make threats. The sooner you get here, the less time we’ll have for fun with her.”

Click. The line was dead.

Rosie was standing in the bedroom doorway.

“I heard the phone,” she said. “What happened?”

“I got to go get someone I know.”

“It’s trouble. I can tell by your face.”

“She’s being held.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No. Besides, I thought you didn’t want to get involved.”

“I’m already in this up to my ass,” Rosie said. “I got nothing to lose. And I’d rather be where the action is than sitting back here worrying about you.”

“I don’t have time to argue.”

“Then get the safari going, bwana. And you try anything from the movies like knocking me out so I miss the party and Bart gonna take a piece of your hide.”

The dog looked like he would.

The three of them ran to the elevator. Diamond cursed at its slowness as it descended to the garage. They jumped in his car and screeched out.

“Do you know the area where Tropicana meets Jimmy Durante Drive?”

“I knew you’d need me,” she said. “It’s out on the east side. It shouldn’t be more than fifteen minutes. The area’s being developed. They got a lot of vacant lots over there.” She acted as navigator as they sped through the streets.

It was 3:00 A.M. and the hard-core gamblers were either in the casinos or their rooms, dreaming of how much money they’d win their next time at the tables.

The Strip was far from deserted, though. Hookers offering a different kind of roll waved at cars, doing everything but throwing themselves under the wheels to get attention. Cars filled with losers, who thought their luck would change if they tried their own kind of table-hopping, drove from casino to

casino in search of Lady Luck. A few drunk conventioners cruised, yelling out of their car windows like teenage boys with their first car.

Diamond swerved in and out among them, drawing beeps and curses. Rosie bit her lips.

“Do you have to go this fast?” she asked.

“Don’t worry,” he said, banging the curb as he took a corner sharply. “I’ve always been a pro behind the wheel. There’s something about being in a car that makes me comfortable.”

He made a left onto Paradise Road, nearly hitting a slow-moving Cadillac. Traffic was lighter and he leaned on the gas pedal.

“I feel like I spent my life in a car. Must come from the surveillances I been on. I must’ve tailed a couple hundred people. Did I tell you about the case that got some ink as ‘Race to Death?’ I was following this race car driver, a real hot rod—”

Brakes screeched and a Toyota driver leaned on his horn.

“Please don’t talk, just watch the road.”

“Don’t worry, babe. You’re in good hands.”

“Famous last words.”

He immersed himself in the task of driving, moving the steering wheel like an artist stroking a canvas.

They passed malls with the usual franchises, and developments with cinderblock walls shielding identical houses from the roadway. The houses got cheaper-looking, Spanish-style quickies put up by developers who didn’t come to Vegas to gamble. It was strange seeing regular homes in Las Vegas, like finding a normal household in the middle of an amusement park.

The houses thinned out. There were more sandy vacant lots with sparse scrub grass eking out a dry existence. Wherever man didn’t irrigate, the harsh environment took over.

There was no one on the street.

“You’re not what you seem, are you?” Rosie asked.

“Huh?”

“This talk about surveillances, cases. The way you got Evans on the phone. Who are you?”

They passed Jimmy Durante Drive before he had to come up with an answer. “Get down,” he ordered, and she squeezed below the dashboard.

He drove another quarter of a mile. The ground was flat, with dry arroyos carved into its harsh face.

He saw no one as he pulled the car a dozen yards up the dirt road.

“Stay inside,” he whispered to Rosie. He pulled the dome light cap off, and took out the bulb. No point in giving his caller an easy target.

Diamond stepped out into the cold night air. A dry wind blew an ominous silence across his ears. Torn sofas, car fragments, and rusted refrigerators were strewn near a No DUMPING sign. The city lights in the distance gave a



faint glow to the sky.

He walked a few yards into the brush, carefully watching where he stepped. He was an urban tough guy but he knew the snakes came out at night. And if there was one thing Red Diamond was scared of, it was snakes. Goons with guns, double-crossing dames, sharp knives, bomb blasts, windy heights. None of them bothered him as much as the slithering reptiles.

He heard a cry and began moving in the direction it was coming from. He reached for his .38.

It was gone. He stiffened. Then he remembered where it was. On the small table. Where he'd left it for Rosie.

Diamond was alone in the snake-infested desert, looking for a ruthless kidnapper, without his trusty roscoe.

He felt a quiver of fear, an urge to run back to the car. But he was Red Diamond, and Red Diamond didn't back out of a jam. He pushed on.

The night wind felt colder. The whimpering was louder. He nearly stumbled over her. "It's Red. I'll get you out of here," he promised, kneeling and tugging at the ropes that bound Teri's thin wrists to pegs set in the ground.

A shot whistled over his head. He threw himself flat and cursed the weapon that lay useless in his room.

"John?" the girl whispered.

"We're going to be okay," Diamond said, trying to express confidence he didn't feel.

Another shot drilled into the ground nearby.

"Who did this?" he asked.

"Babe picked me up on the Strip. I should've known," she said. "Him and Flip took me here."

It was closer. Diamond saw the muzzle flash. Near the ground. The gunman must be hunched down in one of the arroyos.

Diamond grabbed a stake and the adrenaline surged. He ripped it out of the ground. Wooden splinters stuck to his hands. He tore at the other stakes until the girl was free. His hands were a bloody mess.

"Who knew that you'd been with me?" he asked.

"I didn't tell anyone."

Another shot kicked up sand barely a foot away. They were pinned down like butterflies on a bug collector's board.

Diamond rose and another shot went off. It was too low to hit him. But not her. Teri Lennox's fear was over. Forever.

Diamond crouched down and moved toward the gully as shots went whizzing by. He yelped in pain and fell on his belly. The sand felt cold and gritty against his face.

A half-dozen more rounds were fired. After the final crack there was a long silence.

Diamond saw the lone figure rising out of the arroyo. Silky. The P.I.

struggled to lie still as every muscle in his body cried out for revenge.

Silky moved cautiously forward, his gun trained on Diamond's body. He was about fifteen feet away when he lifted his gun for the coup de grace.

The headlights from the Plymouth froze Silky like a deer on a country road.

Diamond stopped playing possum and charged as Silky fired at the oncoming car. He saw the windshield shatter, the car swerve out of control and crash into a gully.

Silky turned and aimed at Diamond. The P.I. hurled himself through the air and caught the hood in the gut with his head. Diamond's fists were pumping like jackhammers before the two men hit the ground.

"Don't hurt me. Don't hurt me," Silky whined. He was clumsy with his fists when a helpless girl wasn't involved. The P.I.'s punches sent Silky to thug dreamland.

Red's hands felt like tenderized beef as he got up and ran to the car. It rested at a forty-five-degree angle with its nose at the bottom of the slope. Rosie looked like a boxer who'd gone one round too many. Bart was licking her face.

"Are you okay?" Diamond asked, regretting the dumb question as soon as it was out of his mouth.

"I guess," she said weakly.

"Damn women drivers. Can't get behind the wheel without wrecking a car."

"I must look a mess," she said.

Little bits of glass stuck to her hair and clothes. Diamond leaned in and kissed her forehead, damp with dog saliva. He took some rags out of the trunk and began cleaning her up.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"I think so."

"Good. We got a long walk home. I don't want a cab picking us up anywhere near here."

"Was that Silky?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Is he dead?"

"I doubt it."

She looked sad. And scared.

"You stay here," Diamond said. "I've got to go talk to him."

He walked back to where the thug lay. Diamond was five feet from the man when he saw the movement. Silky had his handgun pointed at Diamond.

The private eye kicked sand in the punk's face. Silky fired. Diamond dove on top of him. Again they struggled. But Silky was weak from his beating. Diamond twisted the gun as Silky fired and the hood caught his own bullet.

"Who sent you?" Diamond demanded of the dying man.

"Help me."

“Who sent you?”

“Moe.”

“What about Rocco? Where is he?”

“Who?”

“Don’t try and cover up. Rocco Rico.”

“I don’t know no Rocco Rico. Help me.”

“Don’t try and cover up.”

I’m telling the truth,” Silky said desperately. “Help me and I’ll tell you about them. I don’t like that bastard anyway. He called me a—” He coughed blood.

“I know about it. About Atlantic City and the mob,” Diamond said.

“It’s more than that. The lands. They looking to—”

Silky began choking. It was the last sound he ever made.

Rosie staggered over. “What happened?”

“Silky wasn’t smooth enough,” Diamond said. “Scratch one punk.”

“Thank God,” Rosie said as she collapsed into the desert sand.

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

## Chapter Seven

The eastern sky was glowing as they neared the Ace of Diamonds. For most of the walk, Rosie leaned heavily on Red. But by the time they reached his suite, she didn't look much worse than a gambler on a losing streak.

Bart curled up on the couch while Diamond soaked in the hot tub and Rosie cleaned herself up in the bathroom. She came out rejuvenated and promptly got motherly, plucking splinters from Diamond's palms as she swabbed his hands with antiseptic.

Diamond put on the work clothes he'd bought, stuffed his money and crumpled suit into a laundry bag, tucked his gun into his belt, and they were off.

In the garage he made a fuss about his car being stolen. The P.I. said he was in a hurry to get to the airport. The valet coming on duty said he'd handle reporting the crime to the police after Diamond greased him with twenty dollars from the seventeen thousand in his laundry bag.

They took a cab to Rosie's apartment. It cost another ten dollars to convince the driver that Bart was an acceptable passenger. Rosie took fifteen minutes to pack.

At McCarran, Rosie stood off to one side while Diamond went to the counter and bought two tickets to her hometown—Washington, D.C. One ticket was in her name; the other in the name John Dalmas.

Rosie was supervising two freight handlers who were nervously loading the Samoyed's sky kennel onto a conveyor belt as Diamond returned. Bart peered out of the wire bars like a hardened con.

"You set?" Diamond asked Rosie as Bart rolled off on the conveyor belt.

"I s'pose. I wish you were coming with me. You're someone special."

"So are you."

"I really like you."

Diamond took her in his arms and gave her a big squeeze. As he embraced her, she felt his hands pressing her buttocks. She pulled away.

"Don't spoil it, John."

"You're right," he said. "My name's not John though. It's Red Diamond. I'm a private eye Tex hired to clean up the problems here. After what we been through, I ought to tell you that much."

"I figured you weren't just another gambler," she said, nodding her head. "I knew there was more to it. Please be careful, Red."

"The long good-bye has never been my style," he said.

They locked eyes, and she touched his cheek. She pecked at his lips.

Diamond smiled as she disappeared. He wondered when she'd feel in her back pocket and realize why he'd pretended to play grabass. He knew she could use the three thousand dollars he'd slipped her.

The flight had twenty minutes to take-off. Diamond scanned the terminal.

The major difference from the hundreds of airports he'd been in was that at most, the only machine you could gamble on provided flight insurance. At McCarran, banks of one-armed bandits tempted the traveler as soon as he or she deplaned.

Flights were announced, passengers were paged. People moved in and out of the restaurants, which served food one notch above the in-flight fare.

Diamond spotted a middle-aged man who looked roughly like himself. The same size and weight, but with thinning hair and coarser features. He'd have to do.

The man had a forlorn look as he slipped silver dollars into a slot machine. Diamond put on an unctuous grin and sauntered over.

"Hi, my name's Alex Kendall. Las Vegas Board of Trade. Why so glum, chum?"

The man had a limp handshake. "I thought I had a winning system for craps. It cost me thirty-five hundred dollars to find out I didn't. I have no luck."

"Not true," Diamond said, pumping the man's hand furiously. "As part of a special no-hard-feelings deal the Board of Trade will give you this free airline ticket." Diamond held up the second ticket. His other hand held the laundry bag like an attaché case. The man looked at him suspiciously, but took the ticket.

"But it says 'Dalmas' here. And it's for Washington. I live in Pennsylvania."

"Mr. Dalmas was so happy about winning, he decided to stay," Diamond said glibly. "And as long as you travel to our nation's capital, we throw in five hundred dollars. Stay in the hotel of your choice and fly home whenever you wish. May I recommend the Jefferson Memorial as a particularly rewarding experience?"

Diamond took five hundred dollars out of his bag. The man grabbed the money. Diamond took his arm and escorted him as far as the metal detector.

"Give me your ticket to Pennsylvania. I'll handle getting this exchanged and baggage transfer. Think of us fondly here in the luckiest city in the world. And come back real soon."

"I don't understand. Why can't I—"

"The flight is leaving. Would you prefer I find somebody else?"

"No...No."

"Have a nice flight," Diamond said, nudging the man through the detector, careful that his gun didn't set it off.

Diamond cashed in the man's ticket and had the baggage shipped to Dulles. He explained to the clerk that the man was a congressional aide rushing back to his office on an emergency legislative matter. It took quick work by the baggage handlers but the flight took off only ten minutes late.

Diamond went to the coffee shop and got a seat facing the runway. Vehicles of bizarre shapes and sizes scurried about outside, tending the big

silver birds.

John Dalmas was gone, Red thought as the waitress brought him the bacon and eggs he ordered. It was time for cabbie Simon Jaffe to begin snooping.

He felt a twinge every time he thought of that name, but forced himself to concentrate on Silky's final words as he wolfed down his food. The Lands.

After the meal, he checked the phone book for any casino named The Lands, or anything similar. The closest entry was The Sands, but he was sure Silky hadn't said that. There were two people with the last name Land in the phone book.

Diamond called Saint and asked him to check out the listed Lands, as well as any others Saint could get from the Department of Motor Vehicles.

"Anything else?" Saint asked. "Maybe you want me to collect fingerprints off every cactus in a twenty-mile radius?"

"While you're at it, could you find out who swiped my car?"

"It happens all the time," Saint said unsympathetically. "What's your angle on this Lands deal?"

"Just a few leads I'm running down."

"You're running down? It sounds like I'm doing all the work."

The cop continued to complain for a few minutes, with Diamond making agreeable grunts in the right places. After venting his spleen, Saint didn't press very hard when Diamond double-talked about what he was up to.

"Remember, you get any solid leads, I want to hear about them."

"You will," Diamond promised. Saint would hear about it, even if it was a day after Diamond got the lead.

They hung up, Diamond went to the cab stand at the south end of the building, and headed to the Speedy Cab Company garage.

It was a little after 8:30 A.M. The only other lands he could think of were the real estate kind. Too early to check the assessor's office. Besides, he couldn't casually walk in and say, "Tell me about the lands."

The cab company was housed in what had once been a gas station. The pumps were still used to tank up the thirty-five red-and-gray Dodges in the Speedy fleet. Where mechanics had worked the office now was set up. A carpet as worn as a taxi dancer's shoes covered the oil-stained floor. Some of the oil had seeped through.

The room where the cash register and counter had been was now the cabbies' lounge. It had a few metal folding chairs around a folding table, a coffee and a cigarette machine, and a half-dozen pinups on the walls. The pinups had been doodled on by an artist with a crude wit and an exaggerated idea of male anatomy.

"Mr. Lucky. Mr. Lucky," Papa shouted and threw his arms around Diamond.

"Hey, Sy, what do you know," Kincaid said. The fat man was eating a Twinkie.

Two other drivers were sitting at the table playing poker with Papa and Kincaid. They glanced at Diamond and returned their attention to the pasteboards.

“Hey you bums, say hello to Sy Jaffe,” Kincaid said.

The two men looked up. One was middle-aged, with birdlike features and thick glasses. He fiddled with his glasses, sliding them up and down his long nose. Kincaid introduced him as “the Professor.” The other was a powerfully built Mexican with a bull neck and black hair in a crew cut. Diamond didn’t catch his name.

“The Professor is as smart as you are lucky,” Papa said. “Ask a question.”

“Your name is familiar to me,” the Professor said. He played with his spectacles, easing them against his brow as he studied Diamond’s face.

“The Professor’s a speed-reader,” Kincaid said proudly. “He goes through twenty newspapers a day. You ever been in the papers?”

“No,” Diamond snapped. The Professor’s steady gaze was making him nervous. Red racked his brain for a tough question to throw the speed-reader off his scent.

“Who’s Vee Brown?” Diamond fired out.

“A fictional private investigator who appeared in pulp magazines in the 1930s,” the Professor said as he leaned back confidently in his chair. “His real name was Vivian Brown and he was purportedly a popular songwriter when not going after the criminal element.

“Brown was the creation of Carroll John Daly who is probably better known for another hardboiled private detective, Race Williams,” the Professor continued. “Daly wrote for the pulps, which survived from the 1930s to the 1950s. With authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, they glorified tough language and tougher men, producing a distinctive anti-hero portrayed by actors such as Humphrey—”

“Is he right?” Kincaid interrupted.

“Sort of,” Diamond said, knowing that Brown and Williams were as fictional as Franklin Roosevelt. But he couldn’t blow his cover and clarify things. “Yeah, he’s right.”

“The hardest part is shutting him off once he gets started,” Kincaid said with a grin.

“We gonna play cards?” the Mexican asked.

“I got an open spot by the airport,” a gravelly voice shouted from the office. “Any of you not too busy flapping your gums?”

The Mexican said, “My turn,” dropped his cards on the table, and walked out.

Papa flipped the Mexican’s cards. He had a pair of threes. The Professor dropped his hand, a full house, on the table without comment.

“No cab for me until noon,” Papa said. “Since I see you Sy, I feel lucky. I play craps. I have sure way a ride told me about. You bet on the pass line, since odds say every third roll will—”

“Tell us about it after you win,” Kincaid broke in. “I hear about a new system every day. I’m going to the can, then I’ll introduce Sy to the boss.”

Papa and Kincaid each left for their important destinations. The Professor kept staring at Diamond.

All Red could think of were questions from his trade. What’s the muzzle velocity on a .38 slug when it leaves a Ruger? What was Vivian Rutledge’s secret? How can you tell if a body’s been drowned in fresh water?

The Professor had a bemused, challenging expression. Diamond had seen that look before, on Oliver Quade, better known as the Human Encyclopedia.

“Who won the 1947 World Series?” Diamond said suddenly.

“I don’t clutter my cerebrum with sports trivia,” the Professor said.

“What year did Lionel Hampton do *How High the Moon*?”

“It was nineteen—I got it. You’re an ex-New York cabbie. Simon Jaffe. I should’ve known from the Vee Brown inquiry. You’re Red Diamond, private eye.”

Diamond put a finger to his lips in a shush gesture. He sat down at the folding card table. “You’re right,” Diamond said, knowing he couldn’t bluff his way out. “But it’s hush-hush. I’m on a case. Can you keep a secret?”

“Are you investigating Speedy Cab?” the Professor asked conspiratorially.

Diamond shook his head. “It’s bigger than that.”

“My conjecture would be that perhaps you are probing the recent rash of crimes in this city. Am I correct in that assumption, Mr. Diamond?”

“Call me Sy. And yes, you are. How’d you guess?”

“I am a member in good standing of the Baker Street Irregulars. As Mr. Holmes would say, ‘Elementary, my dear Diamond.’”

“Not Diamond. Sy, Sy Jaffe, remember?”

“Yes, of course, Sy. Statistically, Las Vegas has always had a large crime problem. But as Disraeli said, ‘There are three kinds of lies. Lies, damned lies, and statistics.’ Because of our large transient population, compared to a year-round residential population of—”

“Okay, I get the message. Will you help me?”

The Professor fiddled excitedly with his glasses. “Most definitely. Will I get to meet gun molls?”

“I was thinking of something more up your alley. I got a tip the lands are involved. I can run down a quitclaim deed as good as the next dick. But this might require a couple of days pouring over records. Ill pay for your time, say, ten bucks an hour.”

“When do I start?”

“The sooner the better,” Diamond said. “Here’s a hundred-dollar advance to get you going.”

The Professor had just pocketed the money when Kincaid returned.

“That’s easy,” the Professor said with a secretive wink at Diamond. “The Tibetan name for Mount Everest is Chomolungma.”



“Glad to see you two getting along,” Kincaid said. “Hey Sy, bet you thought you could stump him?”

“He’s got a lot on the ball,” Diamond acknowledged.

“I’m feeling a trifle under the weather,” the Professor said. “Probably a smattering of wayward bacteria, but I think I’ll go home and avoid stressing my system.”

“Sure, Einstein,” Kincaid said, slapping the Professor on the back. “Got to keep that gray matter in tiptop shape. It’s a lucky break for Sy. The boss will need someone.”

As the Professor left, Kincaid slapped Diamond on the shoulder. “Great bunch of guys work here. You’ll fit right in. C’m on, let’s go meet the boss. His name’s Bill Crane. Don’t worry, his bark is as bad as his bite.”

They stepped through the doorway onto the worn carpet. The office held a couple of file cabinets, four desks, and an antique radio-dispatching console. The decorator must’ve spent at least fifty dollars furnishing the place, Red thought.

It wasn’t hard to guess who Crane was. The other, smaller desks were occupied by officious middle-aged women. Two were answering phones, the others shuffled paperwork. They didn’t look up as Kincaid and Diamond entered.

A woman at the radio console gave Diamond a cool stare. She was younger than the other women and took great pride in her appearance. Her neckline plunged lower than a German U-boat. She was not unattractive, but not as beautiful as she thought, Red figured. A phone answerer handed her a slip of paper and she languidly picked up the microphone.

“This is Speedy base with a fare at the Paradise Valley Country Club,” she said in a sultry voice that made Lauren Bacall sound like a squeaky teenager.

“What do you want?” Crane bellowed at Kincaid and Diamond. “And get your eyes off Velma. She’s my squeeze. You got that?”

Crane rose from his desk. He looked like a third-rate lounge entertainer from a fourth-rate hotel; a leisure suit covering a lean body, hair a shade too blond to be natural, and gold chains the color of his hair around his neck.

“The Professor felt under the weather. This is Sy, Simon Jaffe. I’ll vouch for him,” Kincaid said as he threw his arm over Diamond’s shoulder.

“Stop acting like a homo,” Crane said. “I’ll give your friend the job, ‘cause I’m such a nice guy. If he screws up, Til take it out of both of your hides. Got me?”

Kincaid and Diamond nodded.

Crane stepped in close to Diamond. His breath smelled of mouthwash, antiseptic as a hospital floor.

“I got a few rules,” Crane said to Diamond. “You get half what you take in. I catch you riding off the meter, you never work Vegas again. Got me?”

“Got you,” Diamond said.

“You go out with a full tank, you come back with a full tank. You mess up the car, you pay for the bodywork. No excuses. And you mess with Velma, I do body work on you. Got me?”

“Got you.” Most of Crane’s muscles were clearly in his mouth, but Diamond remained properly deferential.

“You ever been in an accident? Any arrests?”

“No.”

“You’re probably full of shit, like all these bastards that tear my heart out. I’m too nice a guy for my own good. You got number thirty-one. It’s parked out front. It better be back by nine P.M. or your ass is grass. Got me?”

“Got you.”

“And don’t spend your time screwing around at Little Caesar’s,” Crane said, returning to his desk. “Now go out and earn your keep.”

“Boy, he was in a good mood,” Kincaid said as they walked out.

Diamond thanked him for the reference and went to the 1980 Dodge numbered 31. It had 98,000 miles on the odometer, the suspension was shot, and it made a sick clunking noise when he shifted it into gear.

He felt right at home behind the wheel of the clunker. There was a map lying on the front seat and he studied it for a few minutes. The main streets memorized, he stepped on the gas and began to cruise.

His first fare, picked up after they hailed him at the corner of East Fremont and Tenth Street, was a young couple from Dubuque who had just used a bunch of coupons in the downtown casinos. They had made a free phone call home, gotten free popcorn, drinks, and a key-chain. They were boasting of how they’d shrewdly beaten the casinos. It slipped out during the ride that they’d blown sixty dollars at the slots while waiting to pick up their various rewards.

Diamond cruised for an hour, getting the feel of the streets. No one hailed him. He stopped at his room at the Last Chance Motel, dropped off his laundry bag of clothes. He took his cash with him. He drove to the Ramses and joined the line.

The casino was done up in the shape of a sphinx. The drivers clustered near one of the gigantic concrete paws shooting the breeze.

Diamond strolled over and stood with the half-dozen hackies. They were bemoaning the heat, the run-down cars, the economy, and how tough it was to make a living. At the proper lull, Diamond echoed their complaints, and was promptly welcomed into the circle.

The drivers offered advice on specific customers to avoid. Most were drunks who lost their money at the casinos and would throw up in the cab as they tried to deadbeat their way home.

Diamond kept the conversation casual as he asked about the Ramses. All he learned was tour-book information. The most interesting fact to the cabbies was that the hotel had a one-thousand-person auditorium where the shows let out at 10 P.M. and 1 A.M.

Diamond mentioned Moe Greenberg. Despite the ninety-degree temperature, they froze up. Diamond shifted the conversation back to problem fares and the talk resumed. But some of the men regarded him suspiciously.

When it was Diamond's turn, he drew a middle-aged couple from Arizona. Losers. At least that's what he figured from the amount of nagging the taciturn husband was getting from his sharp-tongued wife.

He dropped them off and joined the line at the Flamingo. He made chit-chat with the drivers and avoided mentioning Greenberg. It was easy to ruin an undercover role by pushing too hard.

The fare he caught was a white-haired gent who didn't say much but seemed quite pleased with himself. He gave Diamond a generous tip after being dropped off at the Desert Inn Golf Course.

Red didn't have the patience for more gossiping with other drivers, so he cruised down the Strip. A Chinese guy was standing in front of the Stardust. He signaled for a ride. There was so little hail business in Vegas that a couple of cabbies drove by without spotting him. Diamond caught the classic wave and pulled over.

"Take me to the Tropicana," the Oriental said.

Red switched on the meter as the voice stabbed into him like fingernails on a blackboard. It struck a chord deep in Diamond's brain, the spot where his headaches came from. He forced himself to look in the mirror. The face he saw set off a killer migraine. He drove on instinct as the man talked.

"Boy, oh boy, what a town this is. My kind of place. I won over three hundred dollars. I'm only down about five hundred now," the thin man said. "And eat all you want at the buffets."

Diamond gritted his teeth against the pain in his head. His vision was fuzzy, his ears were ringing, and his tongue swelled to fill his mouth. He gasped for air.

"You know I'm in the same racket. I drive a hack in New York. The name's Fong, Eddie Fong."

They came to a light and Diamond hit the brakes. Too hard. The car bucked.

"Whoa," Fong said, leaning forward. "What's your name?"

He glanced at Diamond and did a theatrical double take.

"Holy cow! Sy, I don't believe it."

Fong was shouting but Diamond could hardly hear him over the ringing bells.

"We heard about you back in New York. Some of the guys wanted to go to the trial, but no one could make it. You know how it is. You miss a day, the bills start to pile up. But we read everything in the Daily News. What are you doing driving again? I thought you were a private eye!"

Diamond made an inaudible whimper. He drove at ten miles an hour. Horns honked behind him as he fought for control.

"You always used to talk about those private eyes. The guys thought you

were full of it. When they read about you calling yourself Red Diamond and killing those people, they sure ate their words. You got talked about more than the Mets for weeks.”

“Eddie?” Diamond’s hands were crushing the wheel.

“Yeah.”

“Eddie Fong?”

“Sure. Your old buddy. What’s the matter, you forget your old friends?” he said with a smile.

They stopped at another light and Diamond struggled to squeeze his head back into shape.

“I’ve been—I’ve been—I’ve—I don’t know what’s going on,” Diamond stuttered.

“Are you okay?”

“Maybe you better pull over, Sy. You don’t look so hot. Like the time Pedro found out his new girlfriend was a transvestite. You want me to drive?”

“No. I can handle it. Where did you say you were going?”

“The Tropicana.”

“Where’s that? Midtown?”

“Midtown? Just keep driving straight.”

The man who was born Simon Jaffe, was living as Red Diamond, and calling himself Simon Jaffe, kept his foot on the gas and jockeyed through traffic. “Why don’t you have your cab?” he asked Fong.

“Sy, this is Las Vegas. My cab’s a couple thousand miles away.”

“Las Vegas. How’d I get to Las Vegas? I don’t even go to Jersey.”

“You better pull over.”

“I can’t. I gotta make my nut or Milly will be really mad. We’re falling behind on the mortgage.”

“Sy, Milly filed for divorce. After the murder trial. Don’t you remember?”

“Divorce? Murder? What the hell are you talking about? Simon Jaffe wasn’t born yesterday. You can’t go pulling my leg like that.”

“They said you went crazy. Thought you were this private eye named Red Diamond.”

“Sure I read about Red Diamond. He’s so tough he’s got balls he hasn’t used yet. I heard lots of stuff about him.” He wrinkled his brow in concentration. “But Milly threw them out. And then—and then—then things get kind of blurry.”

“That was close to a year ago, Sy. You been out of the picture for a year. The guys have been wondering where you been.”

He thought for a minute or so. “Damned if I know. It seems like only yesterday I was talking to the kids.”

“Why don’t we go to a doctor?” Fong asked solicitously.

“Can’t. You know how it is. Got to keep the payments up. Never seem to get out from under.”

“We were pulling for you. Being a celebrity and all that. Every cabbie in

the city claimed he was your best buddy. Are you coming back now?"

"Back where?"

"New York, where else?"

"This isn't New York?"

"Sy, let's get you some help," Fong said.

I'm okay. Really. I feel a little fuzzy. I'll go home and take a few Alka Seltzer and be fine."

He pulled up to the Tropicana and Fong reached into his pocket.

"Not for an old buddy," Jaffe said. "See you at the Balmoral and you can buy me lunch."

"They closed the Balmoral."

"No kidding. I was there a week ago. Where's everybody going?"

Fong got out. "Sy, wait here a minute. I'm gonna go inside and see if I can get some help."

A portly couple shoved past Fong and into the cab.

"Downtown," the man ordered.

"Wait! He needs help," Fong yelled. He tried to hold onto the door but the woman grabbed it from his hands and pulled it shut.

"We saw him first," she said. "It's our cab. You people have no manners."

"Sy, you need a doctor. Wait here and I'll—"

"Downtown," the man repeated.

"Doctors cost money and I got money to make," Jaffe said. "See you later, Eddie."

"We're in a hurry," the woman said. "Let's go."

"Wait Sy, you need—"

"To make money," Jaffe said, tapping the accelerator and moving back into traffic as Fong shouted from the curb.

"Where you folks from?"

"Hartford. Connecticut," the man said. "This is our first vacation here."

"Your first? Jeez, I don't know how anyone could live near this town and not come sooner."

"This near?" the woman said shrewishly. "It took us more than four hours to get here."

"I tell you, train service is really terrible. You shoulda drove into town."

"Train? Drive? It's a couple of thousand miles," the man piped up.

Jaffe shook his head and made a clucking noise. "Some sharpie really gave you a bum steer. It's only about a hundred and ten miles to New York. Must've charged you an arm and a leg. I've heard of taking the long way—"

"Not to New York, you idiot. To Las Vegas," the woman interrupted.

"Las Vegas. Why the hell you want to go there? Atlantic City is much closer."

"I know it's much closer," the woman said, exchanging an exasperated look with her husband. "But we're in Las Vegas."

The cabbie smirked. "Lady, you got sold a bill of goods. If this is Las

Vegas, my name isn't Simon Jaffe. Las Vegas. Hah, that's hilarious. Wait 'til I tell the guys at the garage."

"What should we do?" the woman whispered to her husband. He shrugged. "Just take us downtown," he said authoritatively.

"Sure. Where downtown? The Village? Wall Street? Chinatown?"

"Chinatown? No. The Lady Luck Casino."

"Must be some new restaurant. Never heard of it," Jaffe said as he continued south.

"You're heading the wrong way," the man said.

"Buddy, I been driving this burg for years. I know my way around. And I know the difference between Las Vegas and New York." He laughed.

The man looked nervously at his wife, who rolled her eyes.

"Look at these Nevada license plates on the cars," Jaffe said. "Must be a damn convention in town. I tell you, I don't blame you for getting lost. Things are always changing in the Big Apple. I hardly recognize the place, so much new construction. You got any idea where this Lady Luck joint is?"

"On Third Street."

"Oh sure, the Village. They're always opening up new places down there. Used to be all kinds of coffee houses. Beatniks. That was when you could walk around the city at night without some creep banging in your head. Now it's a nice area, if you don't mind junkies and other weirdos."

"You're one to talk," the woman said.

"What?"

"Nothing," her husband said. "We changed our mind. We'd like to get out here."

"Suit yourselves." Jaffe shut the meter, the man paid him, and the couple jumped out of the cab.

He continued south. The area was unfamiliar. No skyscrapers in sight. Just vacant lots and dry earth. Must be the Bronx, he guessed. He couldn't believe it. Simon Jaffe, veteran New York cabdriver, in an area he didn't know.

Maybe Eddie was right. He should see a doctor. His mind seemed to be slipping. What about Milly and this talk about a divorce? Must be a dumb rumor some bored cabbie got started. She'd never leave their Long Island home.

And the kids? Sean and Melonie. Sean was so perfect nothing could ruffle his feathers. Melonie was another story. Quite a handful. What would happen if her parents split up? It was ridiculous. He loved Milly and she knew it. Sure, he didn't make as much money as she would've liked, but they'd managed for years.

He made a U-turn and headed back. Still nothing looked familiar. There were only a few yellow cabs around. The rest were all different colors. The gypsy drivers were taking over, he thought angrily. And nobody seemed to be hailing cabs.

Finally a man with two large suitcases, standing outside a motel, hailed him. The man got out a mile later after an argument over whether it was called Mc-Carran or LaGuardia Airport and where it was located.

What a day, Jaffe thought. Screwed neighborhood, screwed fares. He had to get back to midtown.

A sign advertised FREE MAPS—NEVADA TOURIST BUREAU.

Must cater only to tourists from Nevada, he decided. He pulled in anyway and asked the dumpy brunette behind the counter for a map. She gave him a map of Las Vegas.

“What kind of crazy place is this?” Jaffe shouted, slamming his fist down on the counter. A clock with dice for numerals fell over. “I want a map of New York. N-E-W-space-Y-O-R-K. This is the goddamn Twilight Zone.”

“This is Las Vegas,” the woman said timidly.

Jaffe threw the map down. “Nuts. I walked into the world’s largest nuthouse.”

He stormed over to a rack of brochures and pamphlets along one wall. He rummaged through them, dropping dozens to the floor as he fumbled with rage. The booklets were all for hotels. Las Vegas hotels.

The woman picked up the phone. “Hello, police,” she whispered.

Jaffe was mumbling under his breath as he continued his search. A brochure for the Ace of Diamonds Hotel and Casino captured his attention. He picked it up.

“... out of his mind,” the woman was saying. “He came in and started yelling and ...”

One of the showgirls caught Jaffe’s eye. Blond. A knockout. Third from the left, she held center stage for him.

“... yes, he’s violent. Making a mess. He ...”

Jaffe knew the girl’s name. Fifi. Fifi La Roche.

He dropped the brochure as his head began to pound. He pressed hard at his temples but it didn’t relieve the ache. “Ahhhhrrrggh.”

“... him in the background. Hurry. Yes, the tourist bureau office. I’m getting ...”

He fell to the floor and began writhing.

The woman hung up the phone, ran to a door behind the counter, stepped through, and shut it. Three locks clicked into place.

He lay on the floor moaning and panting.

Help me Milly. This is New York. No one else will. Fifi help me. It’s Red Jaffe. Simon Diamond. Rocco. Cabs. Scabs. Stabs. Slabs. Fifi. Melonie. Sean. Kids. Skids.

“Uhhhhhhhn!”

Fifi. Needs me. Rocco. Get him. Save Fifi. New York. Los Angeles. Las Vegas. Lost wages.

A scruffy young man with a greasy red bandana circling his pimpled forehead entered.

“What’s going on?” he said as he looked around. He took in the scene, vaulted the counter and opened the cash register. He began filling his pockets.

Diamond rose weakly to his feet. The pounding in his head lessened. He heard sirens approaching. He grabbed a couple of Ace of Diamonds brochures.

The man stuffing his pockets ignored him. Diamond tottered to the door and out into the hot Nevada sun. The glare reminded him of the lights the cops used to grill prisoners. He could take it. He’d stood up to the toughest bulls. He was Red Diamond.

Police cars screeched into the lot. Officers jumped out with guns drawn. They paid no attention to Red as he calmly got back into his cab.



## Chapter Eight

With the picture of Fifi burning a hole in his pocket, Diamond called Evans. The billionaire was watching a Cisco Kid film in his private screening room, Norris said after Diamond's insistent questioning. The door had a time lock on it. Evans could not be disturbed for several hours.

None of the chorus girls were in yet, Diamond learned after another phone rail. Frustrated, he drove to the cab stand at McCarran.

More than two dozen drivers were waiting around. He showed the brochure with Fifi's face circled and offered one hundred dollars to the first man to spot her. He said she was his wife and had run off with a craps dealer. Lots of sympathy, but no leads.

After forty-five minutes, it was Diamond's turn to catch a fare. His customer was a scrawny young man, barely out of his teens, in tee-shirt and worn jeans. He had a pink complexion and a big nose. He stood with one leg bent and braced against the other as Diamond pulled up.

"Lemme guess, you're going to the Flamingo," Diamond said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" the young man asked as he got in.

"Nothing. It's been a hard day. Where you going?"

"To Sassy Sally's. On East Fremont."

Diamond hit the flag and the meter began ticking. Flamingo picked his nose industriously.

"Hey, wipe your hands and take a look at this picture," Diamond said, passing him the photo with Fifi in it. "You seen this broad around?"

"Maybe. Who is she?"

"My ex-wife. Ran off with the kids and my money."

"Nah. I ain't seen her," Flamingo said. A cunning look came over his face and he lowered his voice. "You looking to make some quick cash? Take your mind off your troubles?"

"You got an oil well for sale?"

"You a comedian?"

"Just a guy who takes his jokes where he can get 'em.

"Listen smart guy, you want to make some money, go to this address at nine P.M. tonight," Flamingo said, handing Diamond a business card that read Advanced School of Dealing.

"It ain't what it seems," Flamingo said cryptically.

"What's that mean?"

Flamingo returned his attention to probing his ample nose. He didn't give Diamond a tip. Red was not surprised.

His next fare was a couple of noisy conventioners. Drunk and happy, they sat in the back and gave each other secret handshakes. Neither of them had seen Fifi.

Diamond went to the Sheik, an imposing casino-hotel done up like an

Arab tent. A couple of valets in burnouses stood outside gossiping with the drivers.

No luck With the Fifi photo.

Diamond's fare looked like a fat, prosperous banker. He was more formally dressed than anyone Red had seen in Vegas, wearing a gray three-piece pinstriped suit. He had gold-rimmed glasses and the suave polish of a world traveler. The only signs of Vegas flash were the pinkie rings glittering on both hands.

"Quite a fascinating town," he said after instructing Diamond to take him to the Ramses. "A place where fortunes are made and lost every day. Do you enjoy it?"

"It's a living," Diamond said.

"That it is, that it is." The man had a British accent that sounded affected. "My name is James Thursby the third. What's yours?"

"Simon Jaffe."

"Mr. Jaffe, I've been all over the world. And I've always found taxicab drivers to be particularly savvy individuals. Men who appreciate the merits of a cash business."

Diamond drove while the man lit a Turkish cigarette.

"I wonder if you have managed to put your tips aside in a worthwhile venture? Something with enough risk to pay handsomely and yet not unduly gambling with your nest egg." He puffed and waited for an answer.

"I got a couple bucks put away."

"Would it be improper for me to ask how much?"

"You with the IRS?"

Thursby chuckled. "Far from it. To many of my clients, IRS is a four-letter word."

"So what's your pitch?"

"Very good. I like a man who gets right to the point. My pitch, as you put it, is that I can invest your money in extremely profitable mining stocks. With an effective yield of thirty-five percent. And we work through Hong Kong banks. Wire transfers. The international money market is a thrilling place to be, Mr. Jaffe."

"I bet."

"In a few years no doubt you will own your own cab company. Think of it, Mr. Jaffe, your own boss, commanding a fleet. Make your own hours. Hire a beautiful secretary. A harem of beautiful secretaries. Vacation in Acapulco. Drive your own Cadillac. Better yet, have a chauffeur. What do you say, Mr. Jaffe?"

Thursby was too smooth, his spiel too professional. Diamond had met enough con men to know the routine. Advance fee schemes, Ponzi scams, faked inventory deals. And always at the front, a cunning salesman who came across like a respectable businessman. Play on the greed and ego the way Benny Goodman played on the clarinet. Call the sucker "Mister." Talk about

beating the IRS.

Thursby misread Diamond's smile. "I see you are interested," he said. "I need a small good faith deposit to get the pump primed. A trifling, a thousand dollars. Cash."

"Til get a receipt?"

"Of course. What kind of businessman do you think I am?"

Diamond didn't answer. He pulled into the Ramses.

"Thursby, you won't mind if I bring in a partner on the deal?"

"Not one bit. Another driver?"

Diamond turned and watched Thursby's face as he said, "No. A cop friend. He works bunco."

The fat man was good. Aside from pursing his lips and blinking rapidly a couple of times, there was no reaction. "Very good. I've dealt with many law enforcement officers during my career."

"I bet you have. That's five ninety-five," Diamond said, looking at the meter.

Thursby made a big show of rooting through his pockets. "My goodness, I must've left my wallet in my room. Would you mind waiting here while I run up and fetch it."

"Since you talked about good faith, why don't you leave me some collateral?"

"Surely my good man you don't think I would cheat you out of a pittance like five ninety-five," Thursby said haughtily.

Diamond smiled again and waited.

"Well! I don't think we shall do business after all. You are penny wise and pound foolish," Thursby said. He slid one of his pinkie rings off and contemptuously tossed it to Diamond. "This ring is worth several thousand dollars. Probably more than you will ever hold in your life again. I trust it is acceptable?" Without waiting for an answer, Thursby hopped quickly out of the cab. "I'll be right back."

Diamond took the ring and scratched the diamond along the windshield. It made no mark on the glass. Phony, just like the rest of Thursby.

The P.I. waited twenty minutes, listening to a radio show devoted to hits by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. No sign of the fat man. He dismissed Thursby as one of the imported con men, dropped the zircon in his pocket, and drove off.

He stopped at a pay phone and called Saint.

"I met this guy went by the name James Thursby," Diamond said. "Have you ever heard of him?"

The cop blew up. "What am I, an information operator?"

"Your voice isn't sweet enough," Diamond said.

"What are you, a comedian?"

"You know, you're the second guy to—"

"I got bad news for you Diamond."

"You don't love me anymore?"

"Shut up and listen. First, I ran down the Lands. The two you gave me and another one I got from DMV. They came up clean. One works at Nellis, another is a janitor at Frontier. The third is retired. The only trouble My of them have had is speeding tickets."

"Oh well, it was a long shot."

"Sure. Give good old Saint the busy work. Anyway, that's just the beginning. Fingers is dead."

"How?"

"The chief is putting out he killed himself."

"I got a hunch that's not the full story."

Saint hesitated. "Between you, me, and the lamppost, no. We're saying he cut himself and bled to death. But the way he cut himself. He lopped off his fingers."

"I never heard of anyone playing the Dutch act that way."

"Neither have I. And I been on the job nineteen years."

"What about this Thursby I told you about?"

"Before we get to him, one more little bit of business. They found your car."

"Great. What kind of shape is it in?"

"Not bad. A lot better condition than the bodies we found next to it."

"Bodies?" Diamond asked innocently.

"Teri Lennox. A pross. And a guy whose mug I gave you. Silky. Somebody shot him with his own gun."

"The girl?"

"She was in no shape. He had been worked over. Not a professional beating but a thorough one. What do you know about it?"

"Just what you told me."

"Any idea how your car got there?"

"It was stolen."

"I know you reported it stolen. Very convenient. We got better things to do than devote our time to a case like this. But if we did, you can bet you'd be answering a few questions."

"I'm always pleased to cooperate with the authorities."

"Just be available. I heard John Dalmas left town."

"He did. But Red Diamond is still around. I thought the Dalmas name was getting too hot."

"After killing Silky?"

"Nice weather we've been having. At least you don't think I tortured the girl."

"I don't want anyone taking justice into their own hands. That's what we have courts for."

"And they do such a wonderful job," Diamond said. "What about Thursby?"

“Also known as Sidney Green, Vince Moreno, Dr. Felix Goode, Krikor Armadjian, Sheik Abu Ben Diba, and a couple dozen other names. Fat guy, looks like he’s worth a million?”

“That’s him. What’s his real moniker?”

“No one really knows. He’s changed it legally a couple of times.”

“Where’s he from?”

“A local boy made good. Where’d you meet him?”

“In a cab.”

Saint grumbled.

“Gotta go,” Diamond said.

“Watch your step.”

“Thanks for the free advice.”

Evans was still unavailable when Red called and it was nearing 6:00 P.M. He drove back to the Speedy Cab garage.

Velma was waiting outside. “I tried raising you on the radio all day,” she said.

“Damn, I forgot to turn up the volume. This is my first time in a radio group or a fleet.” He felt a quick twinge of dizziness, the words coming from a part of him he didn’t understand.

“Crane is pissed off, but that’s not what I wanted to tell you, Red.” She emphasized his name.

“What do you mean Red?”

“Red Diamond, hotshot gumshoe.”

“Who told you that?”

“The Professor called. He wanted me to give you his number. He told me about the project you were working on.

Diamond said nothing.

“You come by my place in an hour and we talk,” she said. It wasn’t a request.

“And if I don’t?”

“Tomorrow I go into the office and let everybody know who you are. Over the radio. My own little talk show.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Come by my place in an hour,” she said, handing him a slip of paper with her address and the Professor’s phone number written on it. She flounced away.

Diamond entered the office. Crane was as happy as a flagpole sitter with hemorrhoids.

“I been getting calls from people about some madman driving cab thirty-one. They’re going to complain to the state authority. What the hell did you do out there?”

“I was—”

“And I saw you talking to Velma. She slipped you a note. What did it

say?"

"She was giving me—"

"How much did you take in?"

Diamond tallied up his proceeds. "About a hundred twenty-five bucks."

"That's it? I'm going to check the meter. If I find out you're keeping anything, I'm calling the cops. Got me?"

Diamond nodded.

The hens in the office were clucking while Crane went out to Diamond's cab.

Crane stormed back in. "You should've made at least two hundred dollars with that kind of mileage," he fumed. "I'm not calling the cops 'cause I'm such a nice guy, but you're through. Got me?"

"Yeah." Diamond tossed sixty-five dollars on Crane's desk.

"You never answered my question about Velma. What did her note say?"

"That you were a loudmouthed jerk who couldn't get it up with a hydraulic jack."

"What?"

"You heard me."

Crane pretended to turn away, then came back at Diamond's face with a wide swing. Diamond turned his head and the blow grazed his face.

"You touch me and I file an assault charge," Crane said when Diamond grabbed his lapel. "It's my word against yours, and my girls will back me up. I got juice. You're just a two-bit cabbie. An out-of-work cabbie. Got me?"

Diamond smiled and hit Crane with an uppercut that knocked the man off his feet. Crane lay on the floor clutching his jaw.

"Got you," Red said as he walked out.

## Chapter Nine

Diamond tried calling the Professor from his room at the Last Chance Motel. He got no answer. The P.I. did fifteen minutes of push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks, and shadow boxing, then took a steamy shower.

Evans was unavailable when Red called again, but Norris arranged for Diamond to get another leased car. The car was left on a street near, but not at, the Last Chance Motel. He watched as a casino employee got out and into a car driven by another employee.

Diamond waited until he was sure they were gone before climbing into the car, turning the keys that had been left in the ignition, and heading to meet Velma.

“What did you do at Speedy?” Velma asked as a greeting.

“Crane pushed me. He’s used to pushing people who don’t push back. He made a mistake.”

“A couple of the women from the office called. They said you hit him.”

“Just once.”

He walked over to a divan and sat. She poured glasses of white wine, gave him one, and sat next to him. Any closer and she would’ve been on his lap.

She was wearing dime store perfume. Her face had a lot more lines than he’d first noticed. She flicked her tongue into the wine like a cat lapping milk.

They sipped in silence.

Velma lived in a seedy garden apartment, with a sun-bleached carpet and stains on the frayed curtains. The room was cluttered with furniture that was more Salvation Army than W. J. Sloan. The only bright colors came from travel posters of Europe that were stapled to the cracked plaster walls.

“I’ve never been out of the country,” she said when she saw Diamond looking at them. He felt her predatory gaze boring into him.

She was wearing a top that was not quite see-through but implied it was. Her ample breasts rolled with every breath. Skintight jeans tapered down to painted toenails and sling backs. Her hair was freshly washed, her face carefully made-up. He was getting the deluxe treatment.

She kept her eyes seductively half-opened. Coupled with her natural hardness, it came across as dangerously cunning.

Diamond got out a cigarette. Velma reached into his pocket, took one for herself, and lit both.

“That Crane is a real creep. I’m sure he deserved what you gave him. He’s got two other girlfriends. That I know of. And a wife and three kids. But he gets bent out of shape if I talk to another guy.”

“Why don’t you dump him?”

“The pay’s pretty good,” she said. “How old do you think I am?”

He debated whether to knock a couple of years off his estimate, but

decided against it. "Around fifty."

"I guess it's starting to show," she said sadly. "I'm forty-nine."

Diamond decided to let her speak her piece. He puffed his cigarette.

"I been getting a raw deal my whole life. I used to be on the floor show at the Riviera. Then at the Lion's Den. You didn't know that, did you?"

He shook his head.

"That's right. Then I got involved with a half-smart guy. My ex. That's what I draw. Guys too smart to see how they're screwing up. He's in the slammer now. I hope the bum never gets out."

She rose and retrieved an ashtray.

"My father ran out on my mother the day I was born," she said. "And men been letting me down ever since."

"Not someone as sweet as you."

"Go ahead and make cracks." She stood up abruptly. "I want what's coming to me. I ain't ashamed I'm looking out for number one. It's a sure thing nobody else in the world will."

"How'd you get the Professor to talk?" Diamond asked.

"Easy. He's about as hard to read as the comic pages. Asked me out a couple of times. I heard he was real excited when he called in. I thought they'd gotten a new book at the library. I teased him a bit and he began showing off."

She smirked, an evil expression that fit her face too well. "The Professor showed me where the gravy train is and I'm climbing aboard," she said.

"What do you want and what are you selling?"

"Ten grand. A big time private dick can spare that. Then I keep my mouth shut. I want out of Vegas for good. Otherwise everyone finds out that Red Diamond is in town, and what he's up to."

"What am I up to?" he challenged.

"Something about the lands."

"You know you could get me killed?"

"It's your decision."

Diamond didn't tell her he was ready to shuck the Jaffe identity. Until he could get the Professor to safety, Velma could still hurt him.

"YES or no?" she demanded.

"I've got to think about it."

"So think."

"I need time. Even if I decide yes, I'll need a bit to raise the money."

"You got twenty-four hours. Call me with your answer. I get paid, that's the last you hear of me."

"That's what blackmailers always say."

"Blackmail's such an ugly word," she said coyly as she sat down next to him again. "I rather think I'm selling information."

"Call it what you want," he said, getting up and moving toward the door.

She followed. "It doesn't have to be like that." She leaned against him,



her voice the velvet rasp that drove cabbies wild. "I could use a real man. I'll take your mind off your problems."

"Baby, you are my problem," he said, pushing her away and walking out. She yelled an obscenity at his back.

The murder of Teri Lennox weighed heavily on Red's mind as he tried calling the Professor again. No answer.

He drove over and tried the door to the Professor's apartment. Locked and solidly set in its frame. The Professor didn't seem to be the kind to be out enjoying Vegas nightlife. He was more the type who'd curl up with a good book than a showgirl.

He walked around back, carefully stepping over a vegetable garden. The windows were locked, as was the sliding glass door.

Diamond picked up a garden trowel, edged it between the sliding doors, and pried them apart. He slid them open and entered.

The apartment was a mess. Diamond assumed the place had been ransacked. But the chaos was too casual. Underwear on the living room floor, dishes on every table, newspapers scattered. There were none of the signs of a determined search: torn couch cushions, opened drawers, bookcases dumped out. It was just a bachelor in his natural habitat.

The only neat room was the den: an overstuffed chair, reading lamp, and four walls of bookcases. The shelves held two full encyclopedia sets, Greek and Roman classics, and textbooks. Science, history, psychology, medicine, law, art. *Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny*. *The Existential Dilemma in the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle*. *Thermonuclear Ramifications of Mitochondrial Development*. Even the titles were hard to read.

Diamond felt the light bulbs and the back of the television set. No sign of warmth. No signs of blood anywhere. And if Diamond was reading the debris properly, no evidence of a struggle.

He took a pen from the cluttered desk and wrote: Dear Prof, Get out right away. Go to a motel. And don't tell anyone. Especially Velma. Red. He taped the note to the refrigerator.

As he left he wedged a small piece of paper between the front door and its frame. He went to his car, which he'd parked up the block.

He sat in the seat next to the driver's. The car was facing away from the Professor's apartment. He adjusted the rearview mirror so he could watch where he'd just been.

He remembered the time he'd taught the trick to Jim Rockford, when Jimbo had been starting out in L.A. Competition was fierce, but Diamond didn't mind sharing his knowledge.

There were more good Angeleno dicks than stars on Hollywood Boulevard. Brock Callahan, Toby Peters, Fergus O'Brien, Archer, Stu Bailey, Fred Bennett, Lam and Cool, Marlowe, Shell Scott, J. J. Gittes, Jack LeVine, Ace Carpenter, Tom Kyd, Pete Schofield, Joe Puma.

Scratch Puma. He wound up with a .32 slug in the face. Word on the street was that he'd sold out. The temptations were great, but there could be no remorse for a good guy gone bad.

It's the P.I.'s heart that separates the good dicks from the ham-fisted yoyos who spend their time gathering evidence to break up marriages, Red thought. Sure the gimmicks were nice, like Mike Hammer's move with the rubber wedge to trap a tail in a revolving door or Gittes's cheap watch under the tires to record the time a car moved. But it was heart, the willingness to bang your head against a door until it opened, that made a dick great.

So he sat in the passenger's seat, looking like someone waiting for a driver to come out. He fought to keep his eyes opened and focused, his lack of sleep tempting him with a persuasive lullaby. He kept awake by sorting through what he knew.

Not much. The only thing that intrigued him was Silky and Greenberg's role in the Teri Lennox murder. What was the connection between the Lennox incident, the South African, and Greenberg?

Despite his best efforts, after a half hour of sitting motionless, Diamond was getting drowsy. He remembered the invitation Flamingo had given him.

The Professor would see the note and hopefully clear right out. There was little he could do baby-sitting the apartment. And Velma hadn't begun to spread the news. Yet.

He fished Flamingo's card out of his pocket, read it, and headed out to the address in Henderson.

It was a run-down warehouse in an industrial part of town where asphalted, barbed-wire-fringed compounds held fleets of trucks and mammoth crates. The streets were deserted but around the warehouse a couple of dozen cars were parked.

Diamond leaned on the buzzer at the entrance, a panel in the metal door slid aside, and he held up the card for a suspicious eye.

"This place reminds me of a speakeasy," Diamond said to the unsmiling fireplug who opened the door. The man grunted and indicated Diamond should follow.

They walked down a long hall, past vile green walls lit by bare incandescent bulbs hanging by wire from the ceiling.

"Really spent a lot fixing this place up," Diamond said.

His host didn't answer.

The murmur of voices grew louder and then they were in a cavernous main room. Exposed beams crisscrossed the ceiling, which was thirty feet above the concrete floor.

Roulette wheels spun, dice rolled, and cards were slapped down. But it was no glitzy casino. The wooden tables were chipped and scarred. The green felt tops were mangy. And the characters operating the games looked like a bunch of outcasts from a circus sideshow.

A fat lady in an apron as big as a tablecloth spun a roulette wheel. Card

dealers included a thin man, a woman with more stubble than Diamond, and a couple of dwarves. A pudgy man whose dark mustache glistened with beads of sweat stood on an overturned carton. "Welcome! Welcome!" he boomed at Diamond. "School is about to begin. The road to riches stretches before you and we're here to give you a lift."

The man turned his attention to the thirty-five other people in the room. They were a mixed bag of men and women, ranging in age from their early twenties to late fifties, white, black, Hispanic, Asian. The only thing they had in common was a shabby, hungry look.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the huckster said in a voice that echoed off the hard warehouse walls, "step right up. Don't be shy. My name is Bob and I welcome you to the Advanced School of Dealing."

He shined a beatific smile on the group.

"I see a few new faces here tonight," Bob continued. "I trust our oldtimers won't mind a quick review. Las Vegas is a town built on luck. Great gushing fountains of luck. And tonight I'm going to tell you how to dip into those fountains. Through no fault of your own, you have been cheated out of your just deserts. But you listen carefully to what your friend Bob and our guest speakers have to say and soon you'll have so much money you won't know what to do with it."

He went on mouthing generalities and working the crowd up like a preacher at a Holy Roller tabernacle.

"I will teach you to beat the odds," Bob said. "The casinos don't like that. They have some nasty names for it. I say God helps them that helps themselves. I like to think of myself as Robin Hood. And I invite you to be my merry men. And women."

The crowd cheered like a bunch of bobby-soxers at a Sinatra concert.

"Enough from me," Bob said with false humility. "In past nights we've discussed card counting, magnets and working the slots, and techniques for making the pasteboards your friends. Who remembers some of those techniques?"

"Crimping," an elderly black man shouted.

"Riffle stacks," a white woman said.

"Palming," an Oriental man said.

"Very, very good," Bob said like a pleased teacher. "Now how about different ways of marking cards?"

A bespectacled Mexican raised his hand and Bob pointed to him.

"Edge work, line work, cut out, block out, shading, trims, and sorts," the man recited.

"Go to the head of the class," Bob said. "A quick reminder to practice your mechanic's grip. There will be a test next week. And now, let me turn the floor over to a gent we'll call Joe. Joe is a virtuoso with the devil's dominoes, a man who can make dice do everything but sit up and talk. Please give him a warm welcome."

A bald man with a head as white as a set of virgin dice and eyes as cold as snake eyes nervously got up on the carton as the crowd applauded and Bob stepped down.

Joe stuttered and stumbled over his words but relaxed as he warmed to his subject.

"There are four basic kinds of die that can help you get an edge," he said. "Flats, tops, loads, or edge work dice. Flats, as you might guess, are flattened on one side. Tops have ones, threes, and fives, or twos, fours, and sixes on their face. Loads are weighted. Thus the phrase 'loaded dice.' Edge work die are beveled so they tend to roll a certain way."

Joe got down and strode to a table. The crowd surged around him. He began demonstrating with different dice, keeping up a running explanation of craps. He told how the house can use the dice to cheat a gambler and how they could be turned around to work in the player's favor.

When Joe began lecturing on sleight of hand tricks for palming and switching the dice, Diamond walked away.

He couldn't stop thinking about the Professor. If he had told Velma, who else had he spoken to? Diamond didn't want the genius to wind up like Teri Lennox.

Bob stopped him as he was halfway down the corridor.

"My friend, where are you going?" Bob demanded.

"I remembered I left the gas on."

"The people that run this show don't appreciate anyone leaving early," Bob said, the huckster warmth replaced by a menacing tone.

"That's too bad. Who runs this show anyway?"

"None of your business."

"What's the tuition here?"

"First two classes are free. Then you sign a contract. After a month in the business you can pay the thousand dollar tuition with no sweat," Bob said, taking Diamond's arm. "Now c'mon back in."

The P.I. pulled away. "Mrs. Diamond didn't raise her baby boy to be a card sharp. Good-bye."

"Buddy, something's not right with you."

"You a doctor?"

"No."

"Then don't go practicing medicine without a license," Diamond snapped. "The docs are sensitive about that sort of thing."

"Are you a comedian?"

"I've heard that line before. I don't have all night to exchange witty repartee," Diamond said, turning and taking three steps toward the door.

"Hey, Rube," Bob yelled.

Two gorillas appeared faster than a bill collector on payday. They had forearms the size of sewer mains. They grabbed him.

"Dis guy giving you trouble?" Gorilla One asked. Gorilla Two licked his

lips.

“Tell King Kong and his sidekick to back off. I’m not making half the ruckus I will if they get strong with me.

“We’ll go outside and you can tell my friends a few of your jokes,” Bob said. “If they don’t laugh, they can do something funny to your face.”

Diamond’s arms were pinned to his side. There was no way he could reach his .38 as he was quickstepped down the hall.

“You guys get those muscles playing with yourself?” Diamond asked.

Bob answered for the men, who only squeezed Diamond harder. “They used to pound bigtop stakes for a living. They still like pounding things, smart guy.”

“I heard guys with big muscles are making up for having little dicks,” Red said. “Not that it matters much, since most of them are swishy.”

Gorilla One gave an enraged snort, let go of Diamond’s arm, and swung. Diamond spun, reaching for his gun. The blow caught his shoulder. It wasn’t as painful as getting hit by a cement mixer. It took all of Diamond’s willpower to keep from dropping his weapon. He shoved it into Bob’s stomach.

“How’d you like another belly button?” Diamond asked. “Tell the goon squad to go play mumblety-peg or I waste some lead.”

Bob nodded and Gorilla Two let go. They eyed Diamond like hungry sharks.

He cocked the .38. “They better back off or you won’t be here to hear about it,” Diamond said to Bob.

“Go. It’s okay,” Bob said, and the two gorillas reluctantly lumbered off.

Diamond stepped behind Bob, nudged the huckster’s back, and walked him outside.

“Now what’s the story?” Diamond asked.

“You a cop?”

“I ask the questions. Answer me. Who’s behind this?”

“I don’t know.”

Diamond put the gun to Bob’s head.

“I don’t know. Honest.”

“This set-up hasn’t impressed me with your honesty.”

“But it’s true. We were a carnie group working the boonies. Business ain’t what it used to be. This guy offered us a few grand to take over this place.” “What’s the guy look like?”

“Flashy dresser. Slick hair. Slick all over. Too sharp an operator for Winnemucca,” Bob said. “That’s where we met him.”

“Was he alone?”

“No. With a real big guy. Three hundred pounder. Had one bushy eyebrow running across his whole face. He didn’t say nothing. I don’t know if he spoke English.”

Keeping the gun on Bob, Diamond dug out the pictures of Flip and Babe.

“These two?”

“Yeah. Those are the guys. Who are they?” “I ask the questions. How do you get paid?” “A money order is sent to me. From banks around Las Vegas. I never see anyone. First couple of weeks I got paid in Krugerrands, then they switched to the money orders. The guy delivering them is just a messenger.

“How long you been doing this?”

“Three months.”

“Tonight’s your last night. Pack your tent and split.”

“But—”

“No buts. Anyone contacts you, tell them Red Diamond is on the case.” The P.I. stepped back, keeping the .38 pointed at Bob’s middle.

“We could make a deal. I’ll cut you in for—”

“No deals. Get going. I’ll be back in a couple hours. If you’re lucky only the cops will be with me. If I’m in a bad mood I’ll bring a bunch of ass-kickers from the casinos. Catch my drift?” Bob nodded glumly.

“I don’t think the broken nose boys would be very happy with your show,” Diamond said.

Bob yelled the same obscenity at Diamond’s back as Velma had.

It’s a good thing I don’t have an inferiority complex, Red mused as he hopped into his car, and sped back to the Professor’s.

## Chapter Ten

The paper he'd left tucked in the door was lying on the Professor's doorstep. It could mean the Professor had returned or that someone else was waiting in the apartment. It definitely meant Diamond would not go barreling in like a country lawyer late for a hearing at the Supreme Court.

He'd first used the trick in *The Hard Time Killer* case. After tracking the man to a cheap boarding house in Kansas City, Diamond had taken the room down the hall from his quarry. The killer found out who he was and waited in Diamond's room with his well-used heater. The paper-in-the-door gimmick had tipped Diamond he was inside and...

No time for happy memories of shootouts. He cautiously crawled to a partially open window. He could hear two voices. The Professor had company.

"You said you had a message for me from Mr. Diamond," the Professor was saying. "But then you enter and insist that I imbibe. Rather strange behavior."

"Drink!" the visitor said. It was a cold, commanding voice.

"I repeat. I am not in the mood for liquid refreshment," the Professor said. "And I must ask that you give me the message and depart. I have work to do."

Diamond peered over the windowsill. The Professor was seated, the man towering over him with a tumbler in his hand. He was about sixty, with graying hair and nondescript features.

"This is good stuff," the man said. "Drink!"

Diamond took his gun out and aimed. "If the Professor don't want to drink, he don't have to," he said.

The Professor was still looking to see where Diamond's voice had come from while the man was reacting. Moving with the grace of a professional athlete, he dropped the glass and reached under his jacket.

Red knew he wasn't grabbing for his American Express card. The P.I. snapped off two shots as his suspicions were confirmed and the man produced a .22 Colt Woodsman.

The cigar-long silencer on the .22's end kept things quiet as three shots whistled through the air. One hit the glass near Diamond's head. The pane shattered. A sharp shard brushed Diamond's forehead.

The gunman kept moving and Red couldn't get a clear shot without winging the Professor.

Blood was running down Diamond's face as the killer took off to the back of the house. The Professor was watching the action open-mouthed.

"Open the door," Diamond yelled.

The befuddled genius obeyed and Diamond raced to the rear of the apartment. The man was gone.

When he was sure they were alone, Diamond went to the bathroom and

washed the blood and glass fragments from his face.

"The lacerations appear to be superficial," the Professor said after inspecting Diamond. "There should be no danger of infection, though I'd recommend consulting a licensed medical practitioner. As Jean-Paul Sartre once said—"

"I don't need no sawbones," Diamond cut in. "Just tell me what happened."

"Isn't this exciting?"

"Yeah. It's more fun than a brain surgeon with hiccups. Now what happened?"

"I borrowed several volumes from an associate I encountered at the library. We began chatting and soon were engrossed in the Sicilian defense."

"Mafia?"

The Professor chuckled. "No. A classic chess gambit. Tempus fugit and I only returned a scant fifteen minutes ago. That gentleman was waiting. He wanted me to drink and I was suspicious."

"A smart move."

"There may be veritas in vino but I believe spirits effect the cerebrum adversely by causing the death of brain cells. The neurons depend upon—"

"So you don't booze it up?"

"In a word, no. But I would've refused his offer anyway. The liquid smelled like a volatile alkaloid."

"Any idea what it is?"

The Professor walked out to where the fluid was puddling. He knelt, rubbed the spill between his fingers, and gingerly sniffed it.

"A complete spectrographs analysis would be invaluable but I think a safe guess would be conium maculatum."

"That don't tell me a lot."

"I suspect this is processed conium maculatum or perhaps circuta maculata. Coniine is the volatile alkaloid, the active ingredient. It causes depression of the motor nerves, a slow process beginning with the extremities. The corpus falls asleep. Irrevocably."

"The big sleep. This stuff got a name that's not a jawbreaker?"

"Hemlock."

"Wasn't there some famous Greek guy they made take that junk when he stepped on government tootsies?"

"Very good, though I've never quite heard it described like that. Socrates. In Athens. 399 B.C. Prior to his encouraging me to consume the toxic beverage, my visitor and I were discussing famous poisonings. The Borgias, Locusta, La Voisin. Women predominated, but there were—"

"You're not very shook up for a guy that nearly had poison shoved down his gullet and a shootout in his living room."

"This is quite exciting. Do you think I'll meet sensual but treacherous women who will try to seduce confidential information from me? Perhaps a



vehicular pursuit with tires squealing and firearms spattering?”

The Professor’s voice had risen with excitement. He made an effort to calm down.

“Perhaps the shock will set in later,” he continued. “That is quite normal. But for now these are the sort of situations I had only read about.”

“You’re a strange bird but I can understand what you’re feeling,” Diamond said. “Anyway, you already met your beautiful treacherous doll, Velma.”

“Surely you jest.”

“She tried shaking me down for ten Gs. But she promised to hold off spilling the beans until tomorrow. Did you tell anyone else?”

The Professor thought for a moment. “Only my chess buddy. And the clerk in the real estate records office.”

“A secret’s a secret when two people know it and one of them’s dead.”

“And my landlady. And the clerk in the corporate records office. Oh yes, my mailman too.”

“Why didn’t you take an ad in the papers?”

“You told me to keep it quiet,” the Professor said. “I only told people I trust.”

“Well you blew it with Velma. And who knows who else.”

The Professor looked crushed. “You mean someone violated my confidence?”

“I don’t think that guy with the poison and the twenty-two was here because you got library books overdue,” Diamond said. “Did you get a good look at him?”

“He was a white male. Late fifties. Gray hair, brown eyes. About five feet ten inches tall. No more than a hundred and seventy pounds. Wearing a custom suit, expensive shoes. Scar on his left hand. At least partially ambidextrous. Thin lips and a broad nose.”

“That’s not a bad description. Sherlock Holmes would be proud.”

The Professor grinned. “Also he wasn’t wearing a wedding band and he had dandruff.”

“Til find him a broad and buy him shampoo,” Diamond said. “But first we get you to safety. How’s your investigation going?”

“No conclusions yet, but there are some interesting trends. I’d rather study the matter further before commenting.”

“How much more time you need?”

“Another day. But I want to be in the thick of things. To smell cordite and cheap perfume, the thrill of the hunt, chasing villains down dark alleys while —”

“I don’t have time to teach you the facts of life. Street life, that is.” Diamond said. “Is there any city you’d want to go to?”

“I’ve never been to Los Angeles. I know it has a reputation as a cultural wasteland but they do have the Huntington Library, the Norton Simon, some

fair universities, the Jet Propulsion Lab, Rand Corporation ...”

The Professor continued his list while Diamond mulled over the pros and cons. L.A. was less than an hour flight from Las Vegas. A lot of the Vegas crowd hung out in “El Lay” and vice versa. There were plenty of wiseguys who’d snitch out the Professor or handle whacking him themselves. But Los Angeles was a good city to get lost in. Sprawling, with tangled jurisdictions, people who knew to mind their own business. If a guy kept his nose clean, he could easily get lost in the crowd.

“...C. Page Museum, Getty Museum,” the Professor was saying.

“Fine. Could you stay out of trouble if I gave you a thousand bucks?”

“I expect I wouldn’t need anywhere near that. My needs are quite modest.”

“Grab your gear,” Diamond said, pointing toward the bedroom. “We move you into a motel around here tonight. Tomorrow you do the research you have to, then fly to Los Angeles. Write up your report and give me a call. You can reach me at the Last Chance Motel or the Ace of Diamonds.”

“I comprehend fully,” the Professor said from the bedroom where he was emptying drawers.

It took the genius a half hour to pack, with most of the time devoted to deliberating over which books he should take.

They drove to the outskirts of town and found a motel that appeared to cater to tourist families. On the ride over, Diamond followed the Professor’s car, and kept watch for any tails.

The Professor registered in the motel under the name Augie Dupin. Diamond gave him a grand and cautioned him to speak to no one about what he was up to.

The P.I. could barely keep his eyes open as he headed back to the Last Chance Motel. He hit the pillow like a truck without brakes.

He was dreaming of a casino where one-armed bandits paid off in bullets. Rocco was the pit boss. A couple of strong arms were shoving Diamond toward Rocco’s bottomless pit.

The dream shifted back to his room but the hands were still on him. He grabbed for the gun under his pillow. It was gone.

He was wide awake and thrashing, struggling with two gray-suited men. Faceless in the darkened room. A needle gleamed and was shoved into his arm. He felt the prick.

Seconds later his head seemed detached from his body. He had as much control of his limbs as a Raggedy Ann doll. The men dressed him like a mother preparing her child for school.

With a man on either side he was led to a car. The men had bland, expressionless faces. Midwestern WASPish, with thinning blond hair. The only difference between these men and pork-belly speculators from Topeka were their eyes. Hard eyes. The kind of eyes that watched people die without blinking.

They eased Diamond into the back seat. Not gently, not roughly. Efficiently. Like they'd been propping up doped private eyes in the back of Buicks all their lives.

During the half-hour car ride, Diamond kept sending signals to his limbs. The messages came back stamped "Moved—Left No Address." Even his vocal cords were numbed.

They arrived at a complex on the outskirts of town. It was the kind of building favored by insurance companies and budding computer firms—new, clean, with recessed lighting, brightly colored panels, industrial carpeting, and Muzak in the halls.

GENERAL CONSULTING SERVICES read the modest plaque on the door of the third-floor suite. Diamond was lugged in.

It wasn't a good sign that the kidnappers had let him see their faces and destination, Red knew. It probably meant they didn't count on him being around to tell anyone about the excursion. But his body was unable to respond to his concerns.

"Have a seat, Mr. Diamond," a third man said as they entered the office. "Or do you prefer being called Simon Jaffe? John Dalmas?"

He was in his mid-sixties, dapper in a blue blazer and tan slacks. He had a perfect tan and neatly coiffed silver hair. His voice was cultured, as well-modulated as a radio announcer's. He oozed congenial confidence.

Red was lowered onto a leather davenport that probably cost as much as a new car. The warm patina of the antiques gleamed under subdued lighting.

The dapper gent took out a silver cigarette case, crossed his legs, and lit a cigarette with a Dunhill lighter.

"The muscle paralyzer you were given should wear off enough for you to talk," the gent said, consulting a Patek-Philippe on his wrist. "I hope you won't do anything embarrassing like screaming. It's not even six o'clock and there's no one around to appreciate it."

Diamond tried speaking. He sounded like a frog with laryngitis.

"While we're waiting, my name is Stan Stanley," the gent said. "My associates are the Lee brothers."

"Gurgh-uh-gruh."

"Try swallowing and then speaking," Stanley said.

"Gruh. They look...grugh...like feebs."

One of the Lee brothers snorted.

"Not FBI. CIA. Retired," Stanley said pleasantly. "They came to work for our organization after serving their country for many years. Our cash is a nice supplement to their pensions. Do you have any idea which organization I represent?"

"The Welcome Wagon?"

"I see the curare compound hasn't dulled your wit," Stanley said. "Care to guess again?"

"If it's about my taxes, I can explain."

“We don’t have all morning, Mr. Diamond. We are both men of the world. My client, quite simply, is the Mafia.”

Diamond moistened his parched lips with his tongue.

“Surprised?”

“I’m trying to imagine your press releases. ‘Narcotics up, prostitution down. The chairman sadly announces the departure of Vinnie the Blade who was found in a dumpster—’”

“Let’s kill the chit chat,” Stanley said, uncrossing his legs and extinguishing his cigarette. He leaned forward with his hands on his knees. “You are investigating the crime wave in Las Vegas. Your client is Edward Evans. You believe our organization is behind it. I can assure you we are not.”

“Well I feel a whole lot better. Soon as I can move I’ll pack my bags.”

“I doubt that you believe me. To demonstrate our sincerity we will pay you double whatever Evans’s fee is.”

“I can’t be bought. At least, no one’s ever met my price.”

“Not a buy-off. Continue your investigation. Take our money plus Evans’s. Find out who is behind the campaign. But know it isn’t us.”

“Why do you care what I do if you’re not involved in the trouble?”

“You have earned somewhat of a reputation for blundering into things. In New York and Los Angeles. We don’t want problems. We still own large portions of this town and don’t want any disturbances. You find the troublemakers and we’ll handle it from there.”

“So I bird-dog for you and then they get whacked?”

Stanley was silent.

“You’re so efficient in bringing me here,” Diamond said. “You know my background. Why can’t you put your own skullcrackers on the case?”

“I apologize for having you transported so abruptly but we wanted to demonstrate how easy it would be to, uh, neutralize you. If that was what we wanted. As for sending some of our own people, we have. Two were killed. Another neutralized one of the saboteurs before we got any useful information. Unfortunately, this only added to the general mayhem. The last thing we want is open warfare. We’re much more discreet nowadays. There also are certain politics I’m not at liberty to explain. We’ll provide you any assistance you might need.”

“Thanks but no thanks. Red Diamond works alone.”

“A pity. How are you feeling?”

“Like Samson with a crew cut. How long do I sit here like a potted plant?”

“You’ll be fine within an hour,” Stanley said. “The Lee brothers will take you back.”

Diamond tried standing up. He got as far as a puppet with tangled strings.

“While we wait maybe you can help me,” the P.I. said.

“Just ask.”

“A guy named Fingers was killed in the jail. Were you behind that?”

Stanley shook his head. "I understand he cut off his fingers and bled to death."

"Your information is good. Another question. I'm interested in a button man. Late fifties, gray hair, brown eyes, snappy dresser. Five ten, about a hundred and seventy pounds."

"I'm afraid quite a few people fit that description."

"Ambidextrous. Scar on his left hand. Thin lips and a broad nose. And he's got dandruff."

"Gulo," Stanley said.

The Lee brothers looked impressed.

"Gulo?" Diamond asked.

"Very few people see him and live. You are to be congratulated. He was one of our best people."

"Was?"

"He got bored with the usual techniques of enforcement."

"A bullet behind the ear or a bomb under the hood?"

"Whatever. He billed himself as a lethal artist. Insisted on exotic methods custom-fit to each assignment. For example, Irish Kelly. He beat him to death with a shillelagh. You believe Fingers was his handiwork?"

"Yeah. And the attempt on the Professor."

"Who?"

"Never mind. You said 'was.' Gulo doesn't strike me as the kind to open a hot dog stand."

"True. He's now a freelancer, hiring out to the highest bidder. He's quite adept at disguises and extremely dangerous."

"Thanks for the warning," Diamond said. "One other thing. What do you know about Rocco Rico?"

Stanley thought for a moment. "The name isn't familiar."

"I didn't expect it would be. You have to cover up for the top cheese."

Stanley made a gesture and the Lee brothers lifted Diamond effortlessly. They carried him out to the car. During the ride home Diamond practiced wiggling his toes. By the time the brothers laid him back in his bed, he was as graceful as a drunken hippo.

## Chapter Eleven

There were no side effects from the drug when Diamond awoke at eleven. He called Evans, who at last was available. He hurried to the Ace of Diamonds. The guards were lackadaisical as he was hustled through security.

Diamond walked past the bank vault door into Tex's cozy little screening room that could've seated fifty. Only Tex and Norris were in the theater.

Tex had a glum expression as he watched a Lone Ranger film and mouthed the words as Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels spoke them. Norris sat next to the billionaire, dropping popcorn into his mouth like a slave girl feeding grapes to a Roman emperor. As the images flickered on the screen Diamond could make out posters of Hopalong Cassidy, Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, and a half-dozen other cowboy greats on the walls.

"Hi Yo Silver," Diamond said.

Evans looked up bleakly. "Melody Ranch is on next. It's got Gene Autry in it."

"What's the matter, Tex? You look like your prize bull got his dingus caught in a wringer."

Evans sulked. Norris got up quietly and whispered in Diamond's ear. "He's been this way since yesterday. He's subject to terrible depressions when things don't go right. Usually the old movies cheer him up. It's best to leave him alone."

"I can't. I need his help."

"Nobody disturbs him. I had hoped he'd be better by the time you arrived. I was mistaken."

"Hey, Tex," Diamond said.

The billionaire glanced up.

"Where does Tonto take the garbage?"

"You mustn't bother him," Norris said while Tex regarded Diamond blankly.

"To the dump, to the dump, to the dump dump dump."

The Lone Ranger film was ending and the only sound in the acoustically engineered room was the William Tell Overture.

"I get it. To the dump, to the dump, to the dump dump dump," Evans said. He let out a shattering whoop that made Norris jump. Evans unfolded his lanky body from the soft chair and bobbed around the room repeating the punch line. "That's great. I'll remember that one."

He slapped Diamond on the shoulder. "Red, you're my kind of fella." He bounced down the aisle and let out a near maniacal laugh. "I was letting these varmints in black hats get me down. I couldn't find a straight shooter to head security. We had a bunch of bomb scares and I was thinkin' of packin' it in. But not now. Whoooeie! When we going to send these desperados off with their tails between their legs?"

“Let me tell you what happened,” Diamond said, launching into a recital of the past twenty-four hours.

“The Lands don’t mean nothing special to me. How about you Norris?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you reckon he was talking about the lands, you know, the wide open spaces?” Evans asked Diamond. “I know during the range wars folks got mighty touchy about that. And during the mining days claim jumping was as common as garters in a dance hall.”

“Maybe. I’ve got an associate looking into it,” Diamond said.

Tex began twirling a six-gun he took from his hip. “What’s your next step?”

“I’m going to look for a woman.”

Tex was annoyed. “I can understand a healthy young fella wanting to kick up his heels a mite but we don’t have the time for that.”

“This girl is the key to everything,” Diamond responded. “Her name is Fifi La Roche and once I get her, Rocco will have to come to me.”

“And you’re sure this Rocco is behind the problems?”

Diamond nodded.

“Well then how can I help?”

Diamond took out the brochure with his long lost love’s picture circled. “This,” he said with a flourish, “is Fifi.”

Evans took the brochure and studied it. “She’s a purty gal. No question about that. We can do it two ways. I can show this to my personnel director and see if she recognizes her. Or we can go through a photo album I have in the library. It’s got pictures of everyone who has ever worked here.”

“Let’s go for the album,” Diamond said. “The less people that know the better.”

Diamond had seen more books. Once. In the Library of Congress. The walls were filled with shelves and every shelf was packed with titles. Freestanding stacks held the overflow.

“How many books you got?” Diamond asked.

“I stopped counting a long time ago,” Tex said. “Norris and me will mosey down a piece and find the volume for gals working here in the past five years. You jes’ make yourself at home.”

Every western author was represented. Louis L’Amour, Zane Grey, Max Brand, Ernest Haycox, Luke Short, and hundreds Diamond had never heard of: Powder River Bill, Frank Richardson Pierce, J.E. Grinstead, Wayne Overholser and his son Stephen, Eugene Man-love Rhodes.

A smell came to his nostrils, a scent as alluring as Fifi’s perfume. He sniffed his way to the section where the pulps were housed.

*Real Western, Lariat Story Magazine, Two Gun Western, Complete Western, Famous Western, Smashing Western, Sure Fire Western, The Western Raider, Wild West Weekly, Western Story, Nickel Western, Western Tales, Western Round-Up, West.*

He sucked in the woody, musty odor that gave him a thrill he couldn't understand. He was like a hophead in a poppy field. He gently took a magazine and gazed at the cover.

A stubbly, stern-jawed sheriff was blazing away at a half-dozen villainous outlaws. The cover was gaudy and garish with lots of yellow and orange.

Diamond was transfixed. It was like seeing the face of an old friend, only the face was slightly different, and it wasn't the friend you thought.

"Mr. Diamond! Mr.Diamond!" Norris said, hurrying down the aisle. "What happened? We've been calling you."

"Uh, huh, I've been thinking."

"Careful with that," Norris said as he took the pulp magazine and put it back. "These are very fragile. And precious."

"I know. I used to have quite a collection. *Black Mask*, *Spicy Detective*, *Ten Story Gang*, until, until..."

The words came from a place Diamond didn't know and the throbbing began.

"Do you want to sit down?" a concerned Norris asked. "You've had a difficult time."

"No."

"Well then, Mr. Evans is waiting with the pictures."

It took Diamond an hour of looking at photos before he found Fifi. She had been using the name Gayle Collins. The book said she'd worked in the show for seven months, then quit.

Diamond called the phone number on file for her. The number had been disconnected with no new number referral. He got a copy of her personnel photo, jotted down her address, thanked Tex, and headed out.

Fifi's trail was heating up.

It got cold quicker than a skinny-dipping Eskimo. Fifi had moved out of her East Las Vegas apartment two months earlier. Diamond plunged into the tedious chore of canvassing the area. He used the story that he was her long-lost relative trying to contact her to give her an inheritance. He offered a hundred dollar finder's fee to anyone who knew where she was.

No one did. He learned that she played the stereo too loud, had several male visitors who stayed overnight, and was a physical fitness fanatic. She had a blue Toyota with a bad muffler. And she had left suddenly, with no forwarding address.

Saint complained when Diamond called, but he checked Gayle Collins in the Motor Vehicle's computer. She had not updated her address since moving.

Diamond phoned Evans and asked for the home address of Angie, the redheaded showgirl. It took five minutes to get her last name, but then her address came easily. He drove to the house she shared with three other women from the chorus line.

She came to the door with curlers in her hair and a pink floral house robe



draping her body. "What do you want?" she asked angrily. He took out a hundred dollars and she invited him in.

He showed her the picture of Fifi.

"Her. Gayle what's her name. She left the show a few months ago."

I know that. I need to know where she is now."

"She wasn't exactly Miss Popularity. Thought she was better than the rest of us," Angie said. "Red, 111 give you some advice. Stay away from her."

"I'm going to find her. With your help," Diamond said, waving the hundred-dollar bill. "Or without it."

"It's your life. She caught Moe Greenberg's eye. Lots of girls do. He goes through them like cheap cigars. He's got them stashed in pads all over the city."

Red felt a shudder at the base of his spine. If only Angie knew. Moe was no doubt fronting for Rocco.

"Any idea where he's got her?"

"I think one of the girls saw her a few weeks ago. He's got a couple he keeps in the Lion's Den. But I think someone saw her on the street. She jogs five miles a day."

"Jogs?"

"Runs. She's a health-food nut. Always kept yogurt in the refrigerator at work. The stuff would get old and stink to high heaven."

"Who saw her?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Can you find out?"

"Tonight. At the show," Angie said. "I'll ask around."

Diamond pulled two twenties and a ten-dollar bill out of his wallet. "Here's half. You get me that information, the rest is yours. With my undying gratitude."

"You may regret it," she said, taking the money.

He went back to the Last Chance Motel and gathered his belongings. Simon Jaffe was history. Red Diamond was back in action.

He couldn't look like a rumpled bum when he met his Fifi. He stopped at a dry cleaning store, dropped off his laundry bag, and paid for rush service.

While he was waiting he went out for a quick meal and called Velma.

"I ain't playing and I ain't paying," he told her.

"How about five thousand?"

"How about taking a hike?"

"A thousand?"

"Til give you a tip. Don't go over twenty-one when you play blackjack."

"Bastard."

"And give up the blackmail racket. You're too sweet and innocent for it."

"I'll get you. Everyone will know who you are and what you're up to. There won't be a cocktail lounge in town you can go into without everyone

knowing. I'll—"

He hung up on the fuming woman. Too many people already knew who he was. It was time to take a new tack. Red Diamond, bait. Set himself out like a bowl of sugar and wait for the roaches to come calling.

And maybe, if he was lucky, Fifi would hear he was around.

He called Saint and asked what the cop knew about Stan Stanley.

"Believe it or not he's a PR man for the wiseguys," Saint said.

"I believe it. Now I got a tip for you. I got word that Fingers was whacked by a mug named Gulo. Freelance killer and all-around nice guy."

Diamond gave Saint Gulo's description. He was rewarded with a begrudging thanks.

Back in the store, the P.I. sat and waited. How many precious years of his life were spent waiting; for clients, on surveillances, while clerks shuffled through records, for Fifi.

*It was January and the rain was coming. The wind chimes on the redwood deck outside the Malibu restaurant jingled in the moist breeze. The sea outside the restaurant window was flexing its great green-and-white muscles.*

*It was the kind of night a guy should be curled up in front of a fireplace with a leggy broad and a bottle of hooch.*

*But Michael David Rankin had called me and told me to meet him at the restaurant perched on the ocean's edge. Rankin better show. I couldn't afford a Ritz cracker in this joint. I'd been sitting for a half hour trying to figure out what the dozen pieces of silverware in front of me did when he walked through the door, a harried man in a tuxedo as black as midnight on the high seas.*

*The maitre d' who had treated me like a steerage refugee would've kissed Rankin's feet if the man had wanted it.*

*Rankin's orbs glommed me and he hurried to my table like a Muslim to Mecca. My stock with the staff jumped 1,000 percent.*

*"Mr. Diamond, I need your help," Rankin said as he pulled up a chair.*

*How can you say no to a guy worth \$35 million? Especially when you're a private dick whose socks have more holes than a field full of gophers.*

*Rankin shooed away the attentive staff that had been working hard at ignoring me. He laid out his tale of woe.*

*His closest living relative, a niece, had run off with a Lebanese tango dancer. He loved her and wanted to make sure her departure was entirely voluntary. The cops said it was. He wasn't so sure.*

*No rough stuff, he told me.*

*I said yes. But by the time the caper was through, there'd be nine jokers pushing up daisies.*

Scott Marks had gotten most of it right, Red recalled. The Lebanese dancer had turned out to be making a little extra on the side by smuggling

hashish into the good old U.S. of A. And selling American girls into white slavery in his native country. The kind of guy who liked dancing on people's graves. The trail had led back to Rocco. On the freighter. Red thought his ticket had been punched when the deck hand with the baling hook—

"Your order is ready," the teenager behind the counter in the dry cleaning store said.

Diamond retrieved his freshly pressed suit and neatly blocked hat. He got back into his car and headed toward the Strip.

His mind drifted back to Rankin's problem as he drove. He could almost smell the exotic odors of the Casbah, the spices, the sweat, the backed up or non-existent sewers. The way he'd stormed into the heavily guarded building where the women had been held.

And there was Fifi. About to be brutalized by a towering hulk with a scar like the San Andreas fault across his forehead.

Red hadn't spoken. His .38 had done all the talking. Four shots. Four dead. And Fifi was back in his arms.

The reinforcements had come storming in. They thought they were going to break up a squabble among the slave girls. They hadn't counted on the pitiless fists of Red Diamond.

He couldn't kick them in the balls. Most were eunuchs. But Algerian doctors must've had a field day patching up the busted jaws and noses he handed out.

With Fifi and Rankin's niece in tow, they'd traveled to Morocco, staying one step ahead of the pursuing thugs. Then Fifi had saved his life, when...

Fifi. God how he missed her. He thought of her held captive in Greenberg's casino. He couldn't search every room. But he could make Moe talk.

Red knew he could get mean when he had to. And with Fifi held captive, he had to. He couldn't wait for the bedbugs to come to him.

He pulled his snap-brim down lower and leaned on the accelerator.

Five minutes later, he ventured into the Lion's Den.

## Chapter Twelve

A couple of big stuffed lions, looking bedraggled after being handled by millions of tourists, were set just inside the entrance. A tourist in a Hawaiian print shirt was posing astride one of the forlorn beasts. His wife took out a camera and two bush jacket-clad security people hustled them away. The guards looked a lot fiercer than the lions.

Murals on the walls depicted herds of zebras, giraffes, and gazelles. Male employees dressed like safari guides; female employees dressed “native” in skimpy loincloths. Archways were framed by crossed spears and the concessions had names like “The Rhino Restaurant” and “The Watering Hole.”

The noise of the human jungle was strictly Las Vegas, with chips clicking, wheels spinning, and cries of victory and defeat. Red moved through the crowds, longing to scream Fifi’s name. Fortune-obsessed humanity swirled around him. His game was for keeps.

He stopped a bored brunette who was circulating with a tray of cigarettes. She was wearing a couple of slivers of fake leopard skin and a frown. The frown was bigger than her skimpy drapery.

“Where’s Moe’s office?” he asked.

“No one gets to see him,” she said.

“He’ll see me.”

“Suit yourself. It’s on the thirteenth floor. Private elevator behind the regular elevator bank.”

“Thanks.” He dropped a buck on her tray. She barely suppressed a yawn as she swivel-hipped away.

Diamond strode to where five stainless steel doors opened and shut, swallowing and disgorging those on the way up or down. Next to the bank was a door marked KEEP OUT: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. It wasn’t locked.

The mock jungle decor was replaced by bare cinderblock and hard fluorescent lighting. His footsteps echoed on tile floors. He rounded the corner and came face to chest with a human mountain that could’ve been a linebacker if he had been six inches shorter.

“Who are you?” the mountain demanded.

“Phineas H. Thorndike,” Diamond said. “That’s ‘H’ as in hurry. I’m here to see Moe.”

“Yeah?” The mountain was not impressed. He took out a notebook and scanned it. He moved his lips as he read through the names.

With the guard’s attention diverted, Diamond took out his .38 and smashed the butt down on the mountain’s crest.

The guard staggered back, then reached out and enveloped Diamond’s gun hand in his paw. Red threw a half-dozen punches that weren’t good

enough. The man-mountain looked amused as he tucked the notebook away. He gave Diamond a backhanded slap that sent the P.I. bouncing off the wall like an over-inflated tennis ball.

Two men came running down the corridor with guns drawn.

“What’s the trouble Lou?” one of them asked.

“No trouble Frank. This guy wants to see Moe. I didn’t get a chance to tell him Moe’s out of town before he gets smart.”

“You want to handle it?” Frank’s thin lips barely moved when he talked. He had an unhealthy complexion and spider tattoos on the back of his pale hands.

“You guys do it,” Lou said. “I got to stay here.”

The third man, shorter, with arched black eyebrows and a black goatee that gave him a devilish look, waved a .45 at Diamond. “Let’s go for a walk,” he said pleasantly.

Frank took Diamond’s .38 from Lou, dropped it in his bush jacket pocket, and gestured with his 9 mm. “Move it.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Diamond said, still shaking the blurriness from his head.

“That’s what they all say,” Frank answered. “Move it.”

Diamond stepped forward and sized up the distance to the men.

“Don’t even think about it,” Devil said.

Diamond and the gun-toting duo moved down the corridor. Their footsteps had an eerie finality. The guards were pros. They stood just out of reach.

“Where’d you do time?” Diamond asked Frank.

“What makes you say that, captain?”

“The way you move your lips. Jailhouse style so the screws can’t see. Either that or you’re practicing to be a ventriloquist.”

“Leavenworth, Marion, and Nevada State,” Frank said as they continued to walk.

“I’m the ventriloquist,” Devil said to Diamond. “And you’re the dummy.”

It was the last thing Diamond heard before the lights went out.

He woke tied to a heavy chair in a dimly lit room that had the dank feel of a castle basement. Power lawnmowers, shovels, and other gardening supplies leaned against the walls.

Devil was standing in front of him puffing on a cigar. He blew the smoke in Diamond’s face and the P.I. coughed.

“He’s up,” Devil said, and Frank came out of the gloom.

“Let’s make this short and simple, captain,” Frank said. “What are you up to?”

Diamond rolled his head around. Aside from the sore spot where he’d been hit, everything seemed in place.

Devil blew another cloud in his face. “Frank, I can tell this guy thinks

he's tough. We're gonna have to waste a couple hours loosening him up."

"But he'll talk. They always do," Frank said. "Remember that guy we had to break about twenty-five bones before he spilled his guts?"

"I liked the one where we used the acid," Devil said.

"Yeah. That was good. I heard he got a job in a freak show."

"What are you gonna do, talk me to death?" Diamond asked.

"I told you. A tough guy," Devil said.

Frank dumped the bullets out of Diamond's gun then made a big show of putting one back in. He handed the weapon to Devil who spun the cylinder and shoved the muzzle against Diamond's temple.

"Frank, I bet you a buck this goes off first time I squeeze."

"Deal."

Devil very slowly began to ease down on the trigger.

Red remembered a few tricks about Russian Roulette from his *Mayhem in Moscow* investigation. One was that if the gun faced you, you could see if the fatal cylinder was lined up. Diamond couldn't see.

But the other fact was equally reassuring. Gravity would pull the heaviest chamber to the bottom. Away from the hammer. Sometimes it didn't work but Red wouldn't be around to complain.

Click. Devil lost the bet.

"See. A tough guy," Devil repeated.

"Okay, tough guy," Frank said. "Let me tell you what we know. Your name's Red Diamond. You're a peeper out of L.A. You had a picture of Moe and a few of the guys in your wallet. And a shot of one of Moe's girls. Now you tell us who you work for and what you want from Moe and we can go on our way."

"Simple as that?" Diamond asked.

"Simple as that."

"I'm no hero," Diamond said after pretending to mull the offer over. "You know that South African guy that Moe's been dealing with?"

"Van Houton?"

"Yeah. Well I work for him. He wanted Moe checked out before they got any deeper on the deal."

"What deal?" Devil asked.

"The big deal. The lands."

"What do you know about that?" Frank demanded.

"They didn't tell me. I'm just hired help. Like you. You probably know more than I do."

Red hoped they'd take the bait and fill in some details. Instead Frank slugged the P.I. in the gut. Then it was Devil's turn, then Frank's again. They took turns pounding him for a couple of minutes without asking any more questions.

"You got a better story?" Devil asked after the beating. His cigar was nearly gone.

"That's the truth. Van Houton," Diamond said. It hurt to talk.

"Maybe it is," Frank said. "You needed to be taught a lesson anyway. Don't go snooping around where you shouldn't. I'm going up to check the story. If it isn't true I'll be back. And then we get nasty."

"I can use his puss for an ashtray," Devil said, gesturing with his cigar stub.

"Save it 'til I get back," Frank said, walking away.

Devil flicked his ashes in Diamond's hat, which lay on a table with the rest of his belongings. Diamond wriggled against his bonds.

"Struggle all you want," Devil said without looking up. "Frank was in the Navy. He ties a mean knot."

"Maybe we can make a deal."

"What kind?" Devil asked without real interest.

"Van Houton's got lots of bucks. He'd pay better than Moe."

"Probably. That cheap bastard don't pay much. But I don't have enough life insurance to switch bosses."

Despite Red's best salesmanship, Devil kept slamming the door in the P.I.'s face.

"Frank'll be back in a few minutes, shamus," Devil said. "I think you're full of it. Just shaddup."

Devil produced another cigar, lit it, and puffed more smoke in Diamond's face. "I want this nice and hot when we start round two."

The door at the far end of the basement opened and shut. Footfalls on the stairs. Devil grinned sadistically at Diamond, got up, and walked toward his partner.

"So what's the verdict?" he asked.

A few more footsteps.

"Frank?" Devil asked.

There was a thud and a choked scream.

Diamond strained to see what had happened. The man took his time walking to him.

A figure stepped out of the darkness. A stout forty-year-old with wavy blond hair. Diamond had never seen him before, but the way he moved was familiar.

He pulled off his wig, exposing gray hair. He took cotton balls out of his cheeks, knocking twenty pounds off his apparent weight.

"Do you know who I am?"

Diamond recognized the voice. "Gulo."

"Not my real name but that is what I am called. Do you know what I do?"

"Sell magazine subscriptions?"

"You are no better with jokes than you are as a detective," Gulo said.

"I been told I was a comedian."

"Don't believe what you hear. I don't go for working people over, like these amateurs," Gulo said, waving in the direction where Devil lay. "Again,

do you know what I do?"

"You kill people."

"Very good," Gulo said condescendingly.

Gulo took a pearl-handled stiletto out of his pocket. He pressed a button and a five-inch blade appeared. Diamond sat very still as the killer moved to him.

"I do not see fear in your eyes," Gulo said. "You are either very crazy or very brave. Maybe a little of both. I approve. You will make a worthy kill."

Diamond could smell the killer's cologne. If the P.I. was free he could've lunged. But the ropes were too secure and he didn't bother to try.

"You are like a great animal, too dignified to struggle when you look death in the eye."

Gulo stepped behind Diamond and placed the cold steel at the top of Diamond's spine.

"I am a hunter," Gulo said. "Killing you now would give me as little satisfaction as buying a pound of chopped meat in the supermarket. Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

The knife was gone from the P.I.'s neck. Red barely felt the ropes part at his hands. He moved them in front of him and began wiggling them to restore circulation.

"I will leave your feet bound. You can release yourself. When we meet again I will have the pleasure of killing you."

"I plan to disappoint you."

"You won't," Gulo said, and he was gone.

It took Diamond nearly five minutes to unravel the intricate knots with his benumbed hands.

He was a bit wobbly when he got up. He quickly collected his belongings from the table, reloaded the .38, and moved to the stairs.

Devil lay at the bottom. One of the pitchforks from the gardening rack was standing in his chest. He was deader than an unwatered house plant.

Frank was sprawled at the top. Red couldn't tell if the rope around his neck was tied in a fourfold blood knot or a sailor's breastplate. The rope looked very nice. Frank didn't. His tongue stood as straight up as the pitchfork and he had a ghastly blue color.

Diamond stepped over him and walked to a rear service door. OPEN ONLY IN AN EMERGENCY it read. I guess this qualifies, Red thought as he shoved it open and the alarm went off.

The fresh air felt good. He really hadn't liked Devil's cigar.

Angie was waiting at the Ace of Diamonds.

"A girl saw Gayle over in Paradise Valley," she said.

"Gayle? Oh, you mean Fifi?"

"The girl in the picture," Angie said. "She saw her at Eastern near Tropicana. She was jogging."



“What time of day?”

“Early morning. About seven A.M.”

“How did she look?”

“The same as usual. Stuck-up.”

“I mean did she look okay? No guys with guns around? Didn’t look beat-up or anything?”

“Listen Red, my friend was driving by. She didn’t give her a physical. Do I get my money or not?”

Diamond gave her the \$50 and his thanks.

She sloughed off his thanks but took the money.

“When you wise up, give me a call,” she said, tossing her hair and bouncing away.

Diamond drove over to Eastern and headed south to where it met Tropicana. He didn’t have the patience to wait for the next morning.

A thorough canvass of an area could make or break a case, he knew. The cops did it with teams of detectives. He was only one guy, but he had a lot more incentive. Fifi!

He parked near the intersection and began ringing doorbells and flashing her picture. He was chased by property protective dogs and propositioned by lonely housewives. A dozen doors were slammed in his face. Just one more house, Red kept telling himself, imagining Fifi’s smile.

His temper was near the breaking point when he rapped on the door of the modest bungalow. No one answered though he could hear a TV on inside. He took out his frustration on the door, pounding it until the house shook.

He heard movement inside and the door finally was opened. A tiny Mexican woman in a baggy housedress gazed at him with curious brown eyes. She looked old enough to remember the Alamo.

“Si?”

Diamond flashed the picture and told of a long lost wife. He tried to remember the Spanish he’d picked up on *The Spanish Fly Caper*, but all he could recall were *bandito*, *pistolero*, *me gusta*, *no me gusta*, and a half a dozen different food names. He spoke very slowly and gestured frequently.

The woman waited until he was done. “*Que?*” she asked.

He repeated the story, louder this time. Besides not speaking English, she was hard of hearing.

“*Perdido. Mi esposa*,” he said as the words came back to him.

“*Que?*”

He shouted the story a third time and she appeared to understand.

“Wait,” she said, and wandered back into the house. She returned in less than an hour wearing glasses.

She studied the picture. “I see her. *Muy bonita*.”

“Where? When?”

They spent ten more minutes exchanging broken English and mangled Spanish.

He finally learned Fifi ran by the house most mornings at about 7:30 A.M. “*Gracias*,” Diamond said. He was sweating profusely.

“*Da nada*,” she answered, and went back to the TV.

He punched doorbells until his fingers were numb, hoping that Fifi would answer the door. The sun had been in bed for an hour when he finally gave up.

His stomach demanded attention and he drove to the diner where he’d first met the cabbies. Kincaid and a few others were hanging out. They hovered around his booth.

“Are you really a private eye?” Kincaid asked.

“Is it true you’re Red Diamond?” “What’s it like being a private dick?” “You ever been shot?” “What about broads?” others fired at him.

Diamond mumbled through his roast beef. Wiping the gravy from his mouth, he leaned back and pulled out a cigarette.

“It’s a tough life,” he began. “It means sitting in parked cars watching houses, hotels, offices. For hours. Sometimes days. With nothing to keep you company but a bottle to piss in.”

He took a deep drag.

“It means rooting through people’s garbage for clues. Knocking on more doors than a traveling salesman. Spending hours going over court records.”

“What about the broads?” Kincaid asked impatiently.

Diamond gave a world weary smile.

“The dames are nice. They go for a guy that packs a rod and ain’t afraid to use it. I been in a couple hundred shootouts and twice as many bedrooms.”

“Ah-oo-gah,” Kincaid said, mimicking a truck horn.

“There was this caper where I met up with a couple of twins. From Siam. Belly dancers they were. They could shimmy in places other gals don’t even have. They were held captive in this warehouse in Pittsburgh. This group of Amazons wanted a king’s ransom from their father, who was king. I busted them loose. I was the first guy they’d been with. The king kept them kind of sheltered.”

“How were they?” one of the cabbies asked, thrusting his index finger into a ring made of his thumb and other index finger.

“I don’t kiss and tell,” Diamond said. “But if I would’ve wanted it, I coulda been Prince Diamond.”

“Who’s your latest conquest?” Kincaid asked. “You dip your wick with Velma?”

“Nah. I got one girl in mind now. A knockout blonde. Name of Fifi. Got legs that go from here to heaven and back again. She makes Betty Grable look like a chicken. Lana Turner look like a guy. Veronica Lake look like a puddle.”

“Who’re they?” a younger driver asked. The others shushed him.

“But it ain’t just looks. I been with enough dolls to know that when the makeup comes off there’d better be more upstairs than a head of hair. She’s smart as a whip, got a great personality. When you’re with her you feel you’re

the only man since Adam. And she's nuts about me."

"Lucky bastard," Kincaid said.

"But it ain't been a bed of roses. There's this guy Rocco Rico wants her."

"Jealous boyfriend?" a driver asked.

"She won't give him the time of day. But Rocco's the kind that'll steal the clock. One time he sicced seven gunsels on me. And my heater only packs pacifiers for six."

"What'd you dor"

"It was a dark night in Detroit. The streets were deserted when the limo pulled up and the hoods jumped out. I knew they were trouble. You didn't have to be Einstein to figure that out. They was carrying enough firepower to wipe out a division."

The drivers hung on his every word. Diamond puffed on his cigarette.

"They were quick. I was quicker. Three of 'em got new navels before they could say 'Stick 'em up.' You coulda sunk a battleship with all the lead in the air. I had to pick my shots. I ran down this alley. I threw a garbage can cover good enough to get me in the Olympics. Too bad for the mug I caught in the throat."

"That leaves three," Kincaid said.

"Yeah. So I jumped up on the fire escape. Ran up to the roof. Red Diamond don't run from trouble. I knew this trouble would follow me. And I had to pick the place to shoot it out."

The men nodded, bobbing their heads like toy puppies in the back of a moving car.

"I got to the roof a second ahead of one of them. He came up real fast. He went down faster. With my footprint on his face."

"Boy you're cool," a driver said admiringly.

Diamond grunted. "So there was two left. I had enough in my rod to take them out but these punks weren't worth good ammo. They came at me from opposite sides of the roof. Smarties. It was too dark to see. They were about twenty feet from me, one to each side. Guns drawn. Breathing hard. Ready to kill."

Diamond took a long last puff and ground out his smoke. The cabbies held their breath.

"So what happened?" one finally asked.

"I popped up and yelled 'Peekaboo.' They both opened fire. Automatics. Ten shots. Boom, boom, boom."

Diamond got up, leaving money on the table for his food.

"And?" Kincaid demanded.

"The dummies shot each other. Rotten break for Rocco."

## Chapter Thirteen

When Diamond got back to his suite at the Ace of Diamonds, the message light on the phone was blinking. Mr. Evans had called, and Mr. Augie Dupin had phoned three times, the operator said. Dupin revised to leave a number and said he would call back.

Norris sounded worried when Diamond rang Evans's office.

"Things are in a terrible state," Norris said. "We've had six cases of food poisoning. Someone left the shrimp out. A truckload of linens was stolen. Two small fires were set. An elevator got stuck on the ninth floor for over an hour. With passengers in it. A half-dozen fistfights broke out."

"How's Tex taking it?"

"He's locked in the screening room."

"Who's in charge of security?"

"No one. The staff is running wild. More people phoning in sick than ever before. We can't take another day like this."

"Listen Norris, I'm too close to Fifi to back off and tackle your staff problems. But if I find her tomorrow, I'll see what I can do."

"I hope we're still around," Norris said.

They hung up, and Diamond got undressed. It had been another full day. His whole body ached from the beating he'd taken and the miles he searched but he forced himself to do fifteen minutes of exercises.

He was soaking in the hot tub when the phone rang.

"This is Augie Dupin. Who's this?" the Professor said.

"This is Red. How are you?"

"How do I know it's you?"

"Don't you recognize my voice?"

"You could be an impersonator."

It took a few minutes for Diamond to convince the Professor he was who he said he was.

"I'm being careful," the Professor said.

"I appreciate that. Now what about your research?"

"There definitely is something going on with the lands," the genius said.

"Is that with a capital L?"

"No. Lands as in terra firma, real estate, the ground."

"What's happening?"

"The first tip was an increased percentage of quit claim deeds indicating rapid transfer of property among artificial persons, to wit, corporations. The conveyances produced a number of instruments and piercing the corporate veil involved ascertaining—"

"It's been a long hard day, Professor, and the last thing I need is you beating me over the head with mumbo jumbo. Can you say it so that a poor, dumb, tired dick can understand it?"

“Surely. Someone is buying up Las Vegas.”

“What?”

“Someone is buying up Las Vegas. Most notably the land along the so-called Strip. There are numerous straw men and dummy corporations, but indications are that at least thirty-five percent of the land from Tropicana Avenue to East Fremont is within their control. I might note their acquisition has included property north and south of those parameters. In the outer reaches they have acquired seventy-five percent of the property. Often solely mineral rights and not improvements. Repetition of certain company names or mailing addresses seems to indicate one person or a small group is involved.”

“Who is it?”

“I ran into a problem there. Liberian trusts. Panamanian holding companies. Delaware corporations funded through accounts in the Grand Cayman Islands.”

“Was there anything that struck you as unusual?”

“Well, there was something,” the Professor said. “On several of the papers I noted a Capetown attorney was involved. I took the liberty of calling South Africa. But he asserted the attorney-client privilege and I could go no further. He was very curious who I was.”

“Did you tell him?”

“I’ve learned my lesson. I identified myself as Stewart P. Hoover, prominent Los Angeles attorney.”

“Is that where you are?”

“Yes. Safely stowed away in the Sunny Motel. But I plan to change residences every other day.”

“Where are you calling from?”

“My room.”

“Next time use a pay phone,” Diamond said gently. “And if you call anyone else, don’t tell them what city you’re in.”

“You’re right, of course. There’s so much to learn, isn’t there? I’ll never get it right.”

“You’re doing fine. Keep up the good work. And be careful.”

“Red, you have my eternal gratitude for sharing the excitement of your lifestyle with me,” the Professor said, before hanging up.

Diamond turned on the heater in the room and dragged his weary body to the bed. He crawled under the covers naked. Sleep came easily.

Fifi was with him. He felt her at his feet, rubbing herself against his calves, then his thighs. She moved slowly, sensuously, sinuously, sliding up his skin.

Her touch was dry but her movements fluid. Like she hadn’t a joint in her body. He grew hard at her touch. Her tongue caressed his flesh, a fast-moving feather of pleasure. She moved higher. Along his ribs. Nestling in his armpit.

“...hhh baby, you know that tickles,” he said opening one eye a crack as

he threw his arm over her.

But there was no Fifi under his arm. He was nose to nose with a snake. A snake that shook its tail at his embrace. A rattlesnake.

He froze, instantly awake as only a man inches away from death can be. His dream was gone, replaced by six feet of terror.

He locked eyes with the snake. The reptile stuck its tongue out at him. The soft flesh of Red's underarm was exposed to the fangs. The arm that had cracked so many skulls felt like whipped jello.

He'd seen what snakes could do. There was that time with Jo Gar and Mallory, when Rocco had trapped them in the room with the hungry king cobras. The snakes had chosen Mallory as their first meal. They latched on with their fangs, giant leeches pumping poison instead of sucking blood.

Gar and Red had strangled the beasts as they clung to Mallory. But it had been too late for him. Mallory had died a horrible death. His screams haunted Red for months.

Red hadn't blinked or breathed. His mind raced through his options. There were none. Red Diamond had met his maker. He wouldn't cry out or empty his bladder. When a snake had your name on it—

Diamond fainted.

When he awoke the newborn sun was streaming into the room. A little past dawn. He shook his head and lifted the sheet gingerly. No snake!

Freudian symbolism. That's what the court-appointed shrink would say. Phallic symbolism. Anything longer than it's wide represented a dingus. And a snake. Wow.

He was caked with dried sweat. He took a hot shower and got dressed. It was warm in the room and he went to shut the heater.

He didn't get to it. Curled near the grill and enjoying the warmth was a mottled gray-and-brown rattlesnake.

Diamond backpedaled to the phone and called the bell captain.

"I got a wildlife problem in my room," he said.

"You got roaches? Til send housekeeping up."

"Not roaches. A rattlesnake."

"C'mon buddy. It's too early to be pulling my leg."

"This is Red Diamond in the Diamond Suite and I'm telling you there's a rattlesnake in my room."

"A lot of people, they have a few drinks, they see—"

"I'll bet you a hundred bucks I've got a rattlesnake up here."

"Be right up."

Diamond waited outside his room. The bell captain sauntered over with visions of easy money in his brain.

"I'll wait here," Diamond said. "It's over in the far corner. Near the heater. Watch your step."

"Sure. You got that C-spot handy?"

Diamond nodded. The man casually walked in. Ten seconds later he came

running out.

“Holy shit! There’s a snake in there.”

“Make sure the maid wears boots,” Diamond said, draping a Do NOT DISTURB sign over the doorknob.

The bell captain wiped his face with his hand. “I don’t believe it. All my life I live in this state and I never seen a damn rattler inside. Let alone in a penthouse suite. How’d that damn diamondback get up here?”

“What did you say?”

“How’d a damn diamondback get in your room?”

Diamondback! Gulo had struck.

“Just lucky I guess,” Diamond said, leaving the slack-jawed clerk as he hurried to meet his Fifi.

The hardboiled P.I. felt like a schoolboy on his first date as he parked the car near the Mexican lady’s house and waited. He chain-smoked on an empty stomach, adding to his giddiness.

It was 7:20 when he saw her in the distance, lifting her legs high as she ran toward him. He leaned against his car and tried to play it cool as she came closer.

She was wearing white shorts that bared sleek, tanned thighs. Her breasts bobbed under a loose T-shirt. Her blond hair was kept from her heart-shaped face by a red headband that was damp with sweat.

He stepped into her path and her baby blues appraised him. She moved to go around him and he put his arms out.

“Fifi!” he shouted joyously.

“Get out of my way or I’ll scream,” the woman said, jogging in place and breathing hard. “My name’s not Fifi. Leave me alone or I’ll call a cop.”

“Fifi, it’s Red. Don’t pretend you don’t know me.”

“You some kind of pervert? I’m warning you—”

“I get it. Rocco’s boys might be watching,” Diamond said, glancing around cautiously. “You’re right to be careful. You’re some doll, Fifi.”

“My name’s not Fifi.” She continued to bob.

“I know you’re using the moniker Gayle Collins. I know Moe put the arm on you. But don’t worry.”

She stopped bouncing. “Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“No need for games. We’re safe. It’s Red, angel.”

She gave him a look that could have chilled the ardor of the most practiced pick-up artist. He was oblivious.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

“You. I love you.”

“You’re nuts.”

“Why don’t we go back to my room. I’ve got the Diamond Suite at the Ace of Diamonds.”

“You have that kind of bucks?”

“So that’s it. I know you don’t like me knocking around the P.I. racket.

But things are different now. Look,” Diamond said, taking his wad of cash out.

She gazed at the fistful of hundred-dollar bills and the man with the fedora on his head and an ear-to-ear grin on his face.

“Just because you wave some money around you expect me to go back to your room with you?” she asked. “You don’t waste time, do you?”

“It’s dangerous out on the street. Why don’t we go for a cup of java?”

“Java?”

“Joe.”

“Joe?”

“Coffee.”

“Oh. I don’t artificially stimulate my body with caffeine,” she said.

“Huh?”

“But I know a place not too far from here that serves a nice herbal tea.”

“Great. We’ll take my car,” he said, reaching for her arm.

She pulled back. “Don’t get fresh. I’ve taken kung fu. My yin and yang are in harmony.”

“They always were,” he said with a wink.

She allowed him to open the door for her. She got in. He went around and settled into the driver’s seat.

“It’s five blocks up. The name is The Body Beautiful,” she said.

“Your body is beautiful.”

“Watch it, buster. I’ve heard all the lines. And yours are about as old as zoot suits.”

“Zoot suits. That reminds me of the time when that riot broke out by the Palladium. It turned out to be a cover for Rocco’s heist of the bank. You were caught in the middle until—”

“You’re weird,” she said. “Just drive.”

The Body Beautiful was all wood with plants in the window, on the floor, and hanging from the ceiling. Diamond felt like he was in the Amazon.

The customers and staff were worshippers of the human temple. They recognized Diamond as an atheist among true believers and dismissed him haughtily.

“I changed my mind,” his dream gal said. “Instead of tea, let’s get the deluxe special.”

“Whatever you want.”

When the waiter came he ignored Diamond and took the order from the woman. He returned with the special malted, setting it carefully before her and sloshing it down before Diamond.

“What’s in this?” Diamond asked her as he took a sip and made a face.

“Brewer’s yeast, two raw eggs, carob, Vitamin E oil, a bunch of things.”

“It tastes like medicine.”

“It’s better for you than medicine. It balances your yin and yang.”

“I don’t know what those are but it sounds like fun,” he said with a



lascivious grin.

"You probably haven't had a healthy meal in years," she said.

"Hell no. I'm not one of those single guys who neglects himself. I start most days with a couple of scrambled eggs, bacon, and sausages. I have steak and potatoes a bunch of times a week. A thick, well-done steak. And a big potato with a lump of fresh butter."

She looked at him like he'd confessed to child molesting.

"That's disgusting. I don't eat the flesh of dead animals. Especially those that have been pumped up with nitrates and burned. You probably take in enough cholesterol to kill a horse."

"I don't understand you," he said, reaching into his pocket for a cigarette.

"Don't smoke," she ordered. The body is a sacred shrine that mustn't be defiled like an old chimney."

"And you think I'm weird," Diamond muttered, stifling his urge for a smoke.

The woman slurped happily at her malted while Diamond made half-hearted stabs at his.

She was even more beautiful close up, her cheeks puffing in and out as she took in the fluid. Hers was a face that didn't need makeup. A healthy red blush called attention to elegant cheekbones. Teeth that sparkled like a Pepsodent ad. Lips meant for kissing. Sparkling glims that coolly watched him.

"Things are looking up, dollface. I'm working a big case. And I got a good client."

"Who?"

"C'mon babe, you know that's confidential."

She stopped slurping and flicked her tongue out for a quick clean up job on her lips. She pouted. "If you don't trust me, then maybe..."

"It's not that."

Then what is it?"

He hesitated. "Just between us," he whispered. "It's Edward Evans."

"Tex?"

"That's right."

"He's got more money than he knows what to do with," she said.

"That's the one. He's hired me. It's a tough job but I know I can do it."

"I used to be in the show at his flagship casino."

"I know. The Ace of Diamonds. That's how I got your picture," he said, showing her the by now dog-eared photo.

"I was in the chorus line. Never got a chance."

"They didn't recognize your talent."

"It's true. I can sing. I can dance. Ann-Margaret gets her own show. I have to shack up with Moe Greenberg."

"Don't talk that way, angel."

"I didn't do anything so bad," she said defensively. "He takes care of me."

So I fake an orgasm with him a couple times a week.”

Diamond looked around ashamed. “Jeez. Fifi. Don’t talk like that. What’ll people think?”

“I’m not the only one to do it. A girl’s got to survive.”

“I know. But you don’t got to go talking like a longshoreman. I bet you didn’t really want to. You had to, didn’t you? He made you,” Diamond said plaintively.

“It’s true. He made me. He didn’t hold a gun to my head but it was sort of like I had to.”

Diamond was tight-lipped with rage. “That rat bastard. He’ll pay for that.”

The P.I. was thinking murderous thoughts when a man came over to their table. He was five feet six and nearly as wide in the shoulders. He had arms the size of Diamond’s waist and veins that bulged like radiator hoses.

“Hey Gayle, remember me?” the man asked.

The woman looked up. “Sure. From the gym last week. On the Nautilus. Eddie.”

“Buzz off,” Diamond told the man. “We’re talking.”

The weight lifter ignored him. “Gayle, you want to ditch this wimp and go work out? They got a new machine, does wonders for your lats.”

“It’s okay, Eddie. Maybe later.”

“You’re sure this guy isn’t bothering you?” Eddie asked.

“If you’re not out of here by the time I count to three, you’re gonna regret it,” Diamond said.

“Oh yeah?” Eddie said. He laid a heavy hand on Diamond’s shoulder and squeezed. It wasn’t as bad as getting caught in a hydraulic press.

“Is that your best answer? ‘Oh yeah.’ You got anything between your ears besides muscle?” Diamond said, trying not to show the pain.

“Get up and say that.”

As Diamond got up, he grabbed the malted from the table and threw it in Eddie’s face. The P.I. followed up with two quick punches to the man’s washboard flat abdomen. They had no effect. Eddie was still wiping gunk off his face when Diamond caught him in the throat.

The weight lifter began to gag. He threw up something that looked a lot like the malted.

“C’m on doll. Let’s go. I can tell when we’re not wanted,” Diamond said, grabbing the woman’s arm.

Out on the street, Red smiled.

“What’s so funny?” she asked, still disoriented by the violence.

“I was thinking. That drink did turn out to be good for my health. You got to move fast. You never know when one of these deals turn out to be a setup by Rocco.” He kept his arm around her as they walked down the street.

“I don’t know,” she said hesitantly. “I used to go there every day. I can’t go back now.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you eat right. Filet mignon. Juicy pork chops

smothered in sauce. Lamb chops tender enough to cut with a fork. Shrimp Newburg. Lobsters Rockefeller.”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You’re just excited at seeing me after so long.”

“Was it necessary to hit Eddie?”

“He had the look of one of Rocco’s boys. And he put his hands on me. Nobody puts their hands on me. Except you,” he said, giving her a tender squeeze.

“I think I better be going. This isn’t what—”

“Trust me, cupcake. We’ll go back to the Ace of Diamonds and unwind. I’ve got to talk to Tex.”

She was quiet for a moment. “You’re really on that good terms with him?”

“The best.”

“Could you get me back in the show?”

“No sweat.”

“A solo number?”

“Piece of cake.”

They got into his car. “The Diamond Suite?” she asked.

“We’re on our way.”

She slid close to him. “Lover boy, call me Fifi.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Fifi insisted on stopping off and buying new clothes before she met Evans. Diamond sat in the department store, keeping an alert watch for Rocco's thugs, while she tried on item after item.

After a couple of hours, the P.I. craved a shoot-out in the lingerie department to relieve the boredom. Instead he got a bill for twenty-five hundred dollars.

He paid for her wardrobe, and they went back to the suite, where Fifi modeled her new clothes for him.

"How do I look?" she asked, pirouetting in front of him in a slinky black dress that barely clung to her lush curves.

"Like a million bucks," he said, grabbing her in a warm embrace.

"Careful. You'll wrinkle it," she said, pulling away.

She took the dress off. She wasn't wearing anything underneath.

Diamond seized her again. His mouth pressed against hers, then traveled down her neck to erect nipples.

"Ohhh, Red," she said. "Can you really get me in the show?"

"If that's what you want, sure," he said in between nibbles.

"Ohhh. Then take me. Do me hard."

He stepped back. "C'mon Fifi. That's no way for a lady to talk."

"Don't stop, you great big hunk. Slam it to me."

"Fifi!"

"What's wrong with you?" she asked. "This is the 1980s. Let yourself go. I'm a woman and I have needs."

"There's no reason for you to talk like that," he chided her.

"Aw, Red Snookums. Don't be mad at your little Fifi."

"It's been a while, angel. We been apart too long. We won't waste any time arguing."

He returned to kissing her. There was a knock at the door.

"Rocco!" he said, spinning away and drawing his gun. "Quick, hide in the bedroom."

The naked woman grabbed her clothes and scurried off.

Diamond moved briskly to the door and threw it open.

The body hit him with inhuman speed. Diamond was down on the floor, something warm and wet on his face, before he could get off a shot.

But it wasn't chloroform that assailed his nostrils. It was doggie breath.

Bart. And coming into the suite behind the Samoyed was Rosie, with hands on hips and a smile on her face.

The dog let Diamond up after the P.I. tousled his fur. Rosie came over and gave Diamond a hug.

"I found some money in my pocket that wasn't mine," she said. "I wanted to return it."

It was Diamond's turn to smile. "What brings you back?" he asked. "Not that I ain't glad to see you."

"You were right," she said. "You can't run away. I

kept thinking about those turkeys making me hightail it out of town. And Tex's offer of heading security. I been working fifteen years and that's the best chance I ever got. No one is going to stop me from taking it."

"I'm glad you changed your mind," Diamond said.

"I'm glad too," she answered.

"Isn't this a cozy little scene," Fifi said from the bedroom doorway.

"Gayle, what you doing here?" Rosie snapped.

"I was about to ask you the same question," she answered. "And my name is Fifi La Roche. Right Red?"

Diamond nodded. "Rosie, this is the gal I was searching for."

Rosie frowned.

"What's this about you giving her money too?" Fifi asked Diamond.

"It was a loan," he said. "She's a friend."

Rosie took the money out and dropped it on the table. "I'm not like you, honey," she said to Fifi.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Fifi asked.

"You know damn well what it means," Rosie said.

The women glared at each other.

"Ladies, ladies, please. This should be a happy reunion," Diamond said.

"Red, can we go see Tex now?" Fifi asked curtly.

"I want to talk to him too," Rosie said.

"Let's go," the P.I. said. "But I'm not walking into his office with a couple of hissing cats. Shake hands and bury the hatchet."

After a few awkward seconds, the women extended their hands for a halfhearted shake.

But Tex was in his locked screening room and refused to come out, Norris told them.

"We've had more trouble," Norris explained. "The plumbing's been sabotaged. Electricity, too. Half the guests have checked out. And he was very upset that someone put a snake in your room."

"So was I," Diamond said. "But I'm not rich enough to spend my life moping about it. Is there any way to get him out of there?"

"The only contact with him is through an emergency intercom," Norris said. "But he left strict orders not to be disturbed."

"Would you show me where the intercom is?"

Norris deliberated briefly. "It may cost me my job."

"I can't give you any guarantees," Diamond said.

"But he seems to respond to you. I'm concerned about Mr. Evans. I'll do it."

The manservant led him to a long-horned cow skull. Norris removed the jaw and a telephone headset came into view.

Diamond picked it up. "Tex?"

"Mmmmn."

"Tex, this is Red. I got to talk to you."

"Go away."

Diamond rubbed his nose. "Listen you yellow-bellied polecat. Get that skinny bottom of yours out here pronto."

The women and Norris were shocked. They heard the mechanism on the time lock spinning. Evans came storming out.

"No one talks to me like that," a red-faced Evans bellowed. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm Red Diamond. And if you curl up and die because some weasels are giving you a hard time, then I say you're yellow. You don't deserve me working for you. You don't deserve any of this," Diamond said, waving his arm to take in the surroundings.

Evans came over and grabbed Diamond's lapels. "I don't take that kind of cowflop from nobody."

The men locked eyes. The others held their breaths.

"That's the spirit, you Texas yahoo," Diamond said. "If you can get that riled up over a little name-calling, you can handle a few problems with the casino."

Fifi, Rosie and Norris jumped when Tex let out a whoop. Only Diamond and Bart seemed unfazed. "Red, you ol' son of a gun. You was joshing me. Made me stop feeling sorry for myself. You're right. Let's get together a posse and run those outlaws out of town."

Tex spun his six-guns and let loose a dozen shots into the ceiling. Red took out his .38 and fired off a few rounds himself. The men reloaded and Tex threw his arms around Diamond.

"Well, pardner, what happens now?"

"You remember Rosie," Diamond said, pointing to her. "She's decided to accept your offer and take over security."

"Welcome aboard," Tex said. "I'm sure you'll do a slam-bang job."

"And this," Diamond said, pausing dramatically as he indicated the other woman, "Is Fifi La Roche."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Evans," Fifi said.

"It's Tex, young lady, to any friend of Red's."

In a stage whisper, Evans said to Diamond, "Gosh darn but she is a purty young thing."

Fifi smiled. Rosie frowned.

"Fifi sings and dances," Diamond said. "I was hoping you could find her a spot in the show."

"A solo," Fifi piped up. "Of course the others could back me up."

"Well little darlin' why don't you show us your stuff," Evans said.

"I don't know if I'm ready right this second," Fifi said demurely.

It took a minute or so to convince her. She launched into a medley of

western songs, including *Bury Me Not On the Lone Prairie*, *Old Chisolm Trail*, and *Buttons and Bows*. Her voice wasn't very strong or very good, but Evans was dazzled by the subject and Diamond was dazzled by the singer. Norris remained expressionless. Rosie and Bart looked pained.

"Well kick my leg and call me gimpy," Evans said. "I'll tell our show director to arrange a number for you. I love that kind of music."

Fifi jumped up and down and gave Evans a peck on the cheek.

"Watch that now. Don't want to make my friend jealous," Evans said, giving Diamond a wink. "We'll get a contract. You have today and tomorrow to rehearse and we'll try it out on the Friday night show. How's that sound?"

"I can't wait," Fifi said.

"Neither can I," Rosie said cynically.

Diamond and Fifi headed back to his suite while Rosie and Bart went down to the security office.

Fifi was just as Red remembered her, bubbling like a happy schoolgirl, but leaning against him in a way that showed she'd graduated. With honors.

He picked her up and carried her across the threshold. She giggled and kicked but didn't fight very hard. He set her down and closed the door. By the time he turned back to her, her dress was gone. She stood before him radiantly naked.

"Do you like what you see?" she asked.

"Come here and I'll show you."

"Make me," she said mischievously.

With a bullish bellow he ran to her. He chased her around the suite until she let him catch her. In the bedroom. He dragged her to the bed and gently tossed her down. She lay spread-eagled, her blond hair splayed on the pillow.

"It's been too long," he said, undressing as quickly as he could.

"We'll make up for that," she promised.

Her body was soft fire under his hands. He kept from squeezing her too hard as she nibbled at his ears and neck. Not much foreplay was needed. He was in her and pumping like an oil man sinking his first well. She bucked and writhed responsively. They gushed together.

They had time to rest and make love again before there was a knock at the door. Diamond got dressed and answered with gun drawn.

A serious looking man and woman stood outside.

"Hello sir. Ms. Washington sent us up to provide bodyguard service for Ms. La Roche," the woman said, without any reaction to his weapon.

"Who?"

"Ms. Washington, the new chief of security," the man said.

"Lemme see some ID," Diamond said.

The duo took identification out of their pockets. Diamond compared the photos with the couple.

"Wait here," he said, shutting the door with them still outside.

He checked the in-house directory and called security.

“Rosie please.”

“Who’s calling?” the crisp female voice asked.

“Red.”

Rosie got on the line quickly. “What’s up?” she asked.

“Did you send two people up here? A Chick Hill who plays in the band, according to his ID. And a Bucky Murrill from security.”

“Bet. I drafted Chick for security. He’s a good man. Ex-Marine. And I know Buck, too. She’s one of the few I trust. Either Braun was a complete screw-up, or he deliberately did a number. You wouldn’t believe these files. It’s a good thing I know so many people here.”

“I can take care of Fifi.”

“If you can tear yourself away from taking care of her, I could use you down here,” she said. “I’m cleaning house.”

“And you’re finding a lot of dirt under the carpets,” he said.

“You got it. I’ve already fired fourteen people and transferred twice that. I need help with the interviewing and checking backgrounds. Your lady love’s got to go down to rehearsal anyway. So how about it?”

Rosie finally persuaded him. He gave Fifi a long good-bye kiss and headed down.

Pink slips fell like confetti on a Broadway parade. Supposedly reliable employees turned out to be fugitives from justice. Saint arranged for a paddy wagon and they were hauled away. Others with questionable backgrounds were transferred to less sensitive positions. Keys were confiscated and locks were changed.

During their few breaks, Rosie tried warning Diamond about Fifi. Before she could say anything more than, “That girl of yours is—” Diamond would cut her off. Rosie was doing a great job but her opinion of Fifi was tainted by female jealousy, Red believed.

Hours passed as they separated the gold from the pyrite on the Ace of Diamonds staff.

Using her years in Las Vegas, Rosie hired a couple of dozen people she had met and respected. An elite group of ten security officers was set up and promptly nicknamed “Rosie’s Raiders.”

Hill and Murrill sat on either side of the show room. As Diamond entered they greeted him with barely perceptible nods. They looked like alert bookends.

Fifi stood at center stage, an expression somewhere between a pout and a snarl on her face. She was wearing cowboy boots, a G-string, a skimpy vest held together with a leather thong, and a white Stetson. Sequins on her outfit glittered from the bright lights. The generous portions of her bare flesh glistened. She launched into her dance number and the source of her sour expression made himself heard.

“Stop. Stop. Stop. You look more like a cow than a cowgirl,” screamed a



lean young man in skintight clothes. He had a neatly trimmed beard and plucked eyebrows.

"Hey you, it's gonna be hard for you to keep that jabbering up with a fat lip," Diamond said.

"Who are you?" the man demanded, petulantly shoving his hands on his narrow hips.

"The name's Red Diamond. And that's my girl you're calling a cow."

Spurs on Fifi's boots jingled as she walked over. "It's okay Red. He's Roger Tweed, the best choreographer around, even if he is a pain in the butt."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Tweed said. "And neither will boyfriend's threatening me."

"I don't want anyone—" Diamond began.

She cut him off by leaning over and kissing him.

"Don't worry about me," she said, patting his cheek. I'm a big girl."

"This is such a cozy domestic scene," Tweed said. "But if we're going to have a show I won't be ashamed of, you better get back to practicing. You need it."

Diamond and the choreographer exchanged the kind of looks cobras and mongooses do. Diamond walked to a chair in the front row and sat.

"Now do it this way," Tweed said, demonstrating a half-dozen steps. Fifi tried following him but was unable to duplicate the moves.

Red wasn't happy about Fifi appearing in front of hundreds of people in so skimpy an outfit. He knew she'd knocked around as a cocktail waitress, wearing not much more than fishnet stockings and a bow tie. And a barmaid. And a showgirl down in the Havana casino before Rocco and Batista got thrown out by the Reds...

*Tommy guns exploded, in the dank night air. Women screamed, men cursed. Inside the casino a pack of overdressed partygoers clawed at each other, scrambling to grab their stakes and escape.*

*I stood on the wooden veranda, my .38 in one mitt, Fifi's hand in the other. She was wearing the matchbook-size outfit that had brought the house down. Mosquitoes suckled on the delicious pink flesh.*

*A couple of house goons came through the door. Before they could uncork their chatter guns, I gave them a few ounces of lead. No charge. Bill it to the undertaker.*

*I scooped up a Thompson. The Commie rebels were getting closer. It made the gamblers yowl like penned sheep hearing a wolf howl.*

*Me and Fifi had nearly a mile to get to the small plane I'd chartered out of Miami. A mile of swamp and jungle and rebels and mobsters. A mile-long gauntlet of death.*

*"You ready dollface?" I asked.*

*"Anywhere you lead I'll follow," she said, slapping a bug that was mountain climbing on her gorgeous globes.*

*“Let’s do it babe.”*

*“I love you Red,” she said, and we headed out.*

*That was the way Red remembered her. It was difficult to imagine the Fifi he saw practicing on the stage following him blindly.*

*Broads were different, more independent, Red thought. It probably came from doing men’s work while the guys went off to fight the Krauts.*

Once he settled down with Fifi, he was sure she’d lose that hard edge. She’d gotten tough, but hell, she’d had to. He’d soften her up. And get her to stop wearing those outfits that made priests want to renounce their vows. It was okay to wear it for him but he didn’t want every Tom, Dick, and Harry enjoying what should be his private view.

She was high kicking now, her long legs flying. He liked what he saw. So would the thousand customers who’d pack into the room Friday night.

But Tweed wasn’t pleased. “What do you think you’re doing? Kicking a field goal?” he asked. He shooed her aside and began doing high kicks. They were graceful and feminine and looked even more obscene when Tweed did them.

Diamond checked that the bodyguards were still alert and then returned to the Diamond Suite. He didn’t stay there very long.

The message light was blinking. The operator said a man had phoned an hour earlier and said, “Tell Diamond ‘G’ called. I want to talk. Meet me at home.” The address was in North Las Vegas.

“G.” Greenberg. At last. Of course it could be a trap. But Red Diamond never walked away from a skirmish. And he’d get to meet Rocco’s main man in Las Vegas face to face, fist to fist, gun to gun.

He checked that his gun was loaded and in place, pulled his hat down rakishly over one eye, and headed to the site.

The only structure at the address he had been given was a run-down field house. It was located on a deserted Little League field that had broken bleachers and walls covered with graffiti that read NV—5, Banger, Disco, and Mr. Cool. High-intensity lights towered above the area, but they were powerless and the diamond was bathed in darkness.

He walked slowly down the first base line, his hand ready to grab for the heater at his hip. The bag at first base was torn.

He followed the line to second, then third. As he walked to the plate, he spotted a couple of kids sipping beer and cagily watching him. He veered from the base line and walked over to them.

They were both black, no more than fourteen, with street savvy expressions that belied their years. Both were lean bordering on scrawny.

“You seen anyone around her?” Diamond asked.

They didn’t answer.

“I said you seen anyone around?”

“We heard you, man. We was wondering what you doing,” the taller

youth said.

“Walking the bases. Waiting for someone.”

“Who?” the smaller one asked after taking a long swig.

“I’m not sure.”

“Say what?”

“I got a message to come here.”

“You right, J.C.,” the smaller one said to his companion. “This dude is crazy.”

J.C. snickered.

“So you haven’t seen anyone around?” Diamond asked.

Neither of the boys answered. The shorter one took another sip of beer. Diamond noticed the name Rocky crudely tattooed on the back of the youth’s hand.

“You Rocky?” the P.I. asked.

“How you know that?” the teenager asked suspiciously.

“I get around,” Diamond said.

“Fool. Your name’s on your hand,” J.C. said.

“We don’t know nothin’,” Rocky said. “You a cop?”

Diamond shook his head.

“Cops is the only honkies come around here at night,” Rocky said. “You got to meet someone, why don’t you do it at one of them fancy casinos?”

“I didn’t pick the spot. He did,” Diamond said.

“Who he?” Rocky asked.

“I told you I don’t know. Now tell me whether you’ve seen anyone.”

“What’s in it for us?” J.C. asked.

Diamond took out a buck.

“Sheeit,” Rocky said.

The P.I. produced a five from his wallet. J.C. snatched it.

“So, you seen anyone?” Diamond asked.

“No,” the two boys answered in unison.

Diamond reached for his money and they took off. They stopped after running about ten yards when they saw Diamond wasn’t pursuing them.

Diamond shook his head and resumed walking toward home plate. A beer bottle whizzed past his ear. It arced down and rolled until it landed on top of the plate.

The explosion knocked Diamond off his feet. He fell backward on the sparse grass and lay looking up at the sky. His face felt like he’d been out in the sun too long; his ears were ringing like the bells of St. Anthony’s.

“What happened, man?” J.C. asked, hovering over Diamond. The teenager’s stunned expression made him look like the youth he was.

“I didn’t know the bottle was loaded,” Rocky said. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Sure,” Diamond said, dizzily getting up.

“I didn’t put nothin’ in that bottle,” Rocky said.

“I know you didn’t. You probably saved my life. That bomb was meant

for me.”

As he staggered to his feet, the realization hit Red like the force of the blast. “G” had been Gulo. If Diamond had stood at “home” he would’ve been made into more pieces than a jigsaw puzzle.

“You hear me, man?” J.C. asked. “I said, “Who are you?”“

“The name’s Red Diamond.”

“I hear ‘bout you,” Rocky said. “You that private eye investigatin’ the lands.”

“Word travels quick.”

“Everybody knows who you are,” J.C. said. He glanced at his companion, who nodded in answer to an unasked question. “I hear that when things go down it’s gonna be real hard on us.”

“Worse than Alabama,” Rocky said.

“Bad times hit your people first,” Diamond said.

“I hear they gonna skin us,” Rocky said.

“What?”

“A couple of the older brothers say they gonna part our hides,” Rocky said.

Diamond looked at the teenager skeptically.

J.C. punched Rocky in the shoulder and with a burst of juvenile energy, they ran off.

Diamond’s ears were still ringing when he turned and looked at the crater where home plate had been. Sliding into home now would be a real adventure.

Gulo had had two strikes. He’d have to take another swing before Red could strike him out.

## Chapter Fifteen

A guard was posted by the suite door and Fifi was asleep inside by the time he returned. Exhausted, she failed to respond to his fondling. He thought he was too hepped up to sleep but with his arms around the woman he loved, sweet dreams came easily.

He awoke and she was gone. A note on the pillow read, Off to rehearsal. Love, FLR. He was lying in bed trying to decide how to spend the day when the phone jangled.

“Huh?” he mumbled into it, his vocal cords not yet fully awake.

“Red, this is Augie...pin. How have...been?”

It was a terrible connection.

“I can hardly hear you,” Diamond said.

“What? Charlie near you? Everything copasetic?”

“Go Pacific? We got a bad line.”

“Time? It’s about noon. Don’t you have a clop?”

After much confusion, the Professor explained he was calling from a phone booth and the number was missing from the dial. He had no change left and Diamond couldn’t call him back. The two men found that by yelling, however, they could almost understand each other.

“I’ve ascertained who is behind the real estate purchases,” the Professor said.

“Asked a train?”

“Ascertain. Found out. It’s a holding company that goes by the name of Dain Enterprises.”

“Dain? Is that Delta-Adam-Ida-Nancy?”

“Exactly. But even more intriguing are the principals. Moe Greenberg and Vincent Van Houton.”

“Is that mountain, M like in Mike, O like in—”

“No. H like in Hotel, O like in Oscar, U like in—”

“Umbrella,” Diamond interrupted. “That’s the cat’s pajamas.”

“Catch Bahamas? Do you know who Van Houton is?”

“Do I ever. That’s great, Prof. I’ll give you a hug when I get back to Los Angeles.”

“No need for that. I appreciate the generous fee for my services,” the Professor said, obviously pleased with Diamond’s enthusiasm. “How’s it going? Any excitement?”

“A couple of kids threw a bottle at me and I nearly got blown up.”

“Lobotomy? Thrown up?”

“I’m getting hoarse. We gotta cut this off.”

“Thrown up?”

“Blown up. A bomb. Boom.”

“A bomb. I see. These children tried to kill you.”

“Not the kids,” Diamond said. “The same guy that tried to ice you. The kids were okay. The weird thing is they said this takeover would mean someone would part their hide.”

“Far and wide?”

Diamond was getting frustrated. “Part their hide! Part their hide!”

“Apartheid?”

Diamond was gathering air in his lungs to yell. He paused in mid-gasp. “What did you say?”

“Apartheid. The South African cistern wherein blacks and whites are kept...”

Diamond didn’t hear the rest of the Professor’s garbled words. Van Houton. Greenberg. Apartheid. Krugerrands.

“...you jeer what I wed?” the Professor asked.

“Clear as a bell. Thanks again. See you soon.”

Diamond had been given the package and the ribbon. All he had to do was tie it up with a neat little bow.

Saint was not as impressed.

“So? Moe and this South African guy are involved in buying up real estate. That’s not enough for an indictment,” the cop said when Diamond called.

“Don’t you see? They’re causing this trouble to drive down prices, then they pick it up for a song.”

“You may know it and I may know it but that don’t mean we can prove it in a court of law. The only one who could connect them to an overt act was Fingers. And he’s not gonna be able to testify. Except to St. Peter.”

“You gettin’ at something?” Diamond asked. “You don’t sound like the gung-ho guy I spoke to before.”

“What are you gettin’ at?” Saint snapped.

“There’s all kinds of pressure that can be put on people.”

“Listen Diamond. You don’t know what it’s like being a cop. Especially here. There’s a lot of temptation. A guy’s got a wife, kids, mortgage. There’s dozens of assholes who’ll pay well for you to close your eyes for a few seconds.”

“But you never did. The good ones don’t. I thought maybe it came from above, that—”

“I don’t need you patting me on the back. Let a cop take a few bucks and the shit’s all over him. Or let him shoot some citizen and you never hear the end of it. I’d like to see some of those pols in an alley at three in the morning, a guy coming at them with something in his hand. See if they waste him or just blast him with hot air.”

“Don’t get sore. It’s part—”

“Of the job. I know. And then they farm you out with a pension that you can’t buy bubble gum with. And you miss the job. You yell at the wife, she takes the kids and runs off with some guy making real money, and you wind

up sucking your revolver in a dirty apartment.”

“What’s bugging you?”

Saint let out a long sigh. “Everything. I just worked through the night. They pulled me off homicide. Some shitheel broke into a display at the Riviera and stole this jeweled gewgaw on loan from a French museum.”

“What’s it worth?”

“A lot more than I’ll ever make. It’s a knife with diamonds and rubies and emeralds. Some king had it done up. And the Feds are involved. State Department and FBI geeks breathing down my neck.”

“And cooperation is a one way street with them.”

“You got it,” Saint said. “The Feds got the bucks, the high priced snitches, the computers, the new cars. I got sore feet.”

“How long ‘til you pull the pin?”

“One year. But what I do then is anybody’s guess.”

“You want to go into the P.I. business, give me a buzz. Lots of the best dicks are ex-cops. Mugs Magoo, Richard Diamond, Matt Scudder, Quinny Hite. My old buddy Marlowe used to work for the D.A.”

There was silence on the line. “Oh, yeah, sure,” Saint said. “Is there anything you want?”

“I was curious about Greenberg’s place.”

“He lives way out on the west side, near Red Rock Canyon. On Buffalo Drive.”

“What’s it like out there?”

“He’s got about fifteen acres. Mini-golf course, Olympic size swimming pool, helipad. Three buildings

with eight bedrooms, four-car garage, wine cellar. A cozy little place.”

“What’s it like inside?”

“Never been there. None of my stoolies either. And he’s got more security gadgets than a bank. We used to be able to keep a better watch on him when he lived in Spanish Oaks. That’s probably why he moved out. What’s your interest anyway?”

“Just curious.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” Saint warned.

“But satisfaction brought it back.”

“That may work for cats, but not private eyes. Don’t do anything stupid. Understand?”

“Sure. Go home and catch up on your beauty sleep.”

“You remember what I told you.”

“Perfectly,” Diamond said, and Saint hung up.

“That no good, lily-livered, sidwinding skunk,” was Evans reaction when he heard about Greenberg’s purchases. “I’ll tar and feather him. I’ll string him up like the cattle rustlin’ hoss thief that he is.”

“I’ve got Fifi. Greenberg is in touch with Rocco. They’ll have to act.”

“And then we’ll get ‘em.”

Diamond got up to leave. “You’re looking a lot better today.”

“Yup,” Evans said. “Rosie is a real gem. She set a trap and caught two of the fellas that was sabotaging things around here. They’re in the hoosegow, along with a coyote her Raiders snagged using a magnet on the slots. And word spread. It’s a new Ace of Diamonds.”

Diamond sent his suit, soiled from the explosion, out for cleaning. Clad in his casual outfit, he spent the day traveling from the Sheik, to the Ramses, to the Lion’s Den, hoping to lay his orbs on Greenberg.

He’d find a spot at each casino that afforded him a view of the entrance to the executive offices, and then keep it under surveillance. To avoid looking too suspicious, he’d play whatever game was convenient. After six hours, he was down eighty-five dollars.

At his final stop, the Lion’s Den, he found a bank of twenty-five cent slot machines that allowed him to watch the entrance to Greenberg’s private elevator corridor.

It wasn’t until he was about to leave that he saw someone he recognized. James Thursby, the flim-flam man. Was Thursby a friend of Greenberg’s? Were the two men involved in some scam together? Or was Thursby, as Red hoped, going to bilk Greenberg out of some of his ill-gotten gains?

It gave Diamond something to think about as he drove back to the Ace of Diamonds for Fifi’s debut.



## Chapter Sixteen

Fifi was standing backstage, her nervous shuffling making the spurs on her boots jingle. Murrill and another female security guard were a dozen feet away and as alert as ever.

“Where’ve you been?” Fifi demanded when she saw Diamond. “The show’s about to start.”

She was wearing the titillating cowboy outfit. Annoyed, Red snapped, “I’ve been working. You’ve been at rehearsal. And I know you’ve got good protection.”

“This is my premiere. Don’t you care?”

“I’m here, ain’t I?”

“Just in time.”

“Fifi baby, there’s no point in fighting. You got butterflies in your belly. Pre-show jitters.”

“I do not,” she said petulantly. She stormed away, the security guards trailing her like respectful ladies in waiting. Red decided to let her calm down and prepare for the show.

He peered out at the audience through a crack in the diamond-studded curtain. Busboys were clearing the remains of the dinners from the booths and long tables. The frenzied activity backstage was building.

He felt he should be planning how to trap Greenberg, but all he could think about was Fifi. It hadn’t worked out the way he’d expected with her. But hell, it was a difficult time. Things would improve once Rocco and this showbiz stuff were out of the way.

The house lights dimmed and three Super Trooper spotlights hit revolving mirrored balls that hung from the high ceiling. A man walked out on stage and bathed the crowd with a white-toothed smile that was warmer than the spotlights.

“Hello you lucky people. My name is Steve Plesa and on behalf of everyone here at the Ace of Diamonds I want to welcome you to the Sparkling Showroom. For the next hour and a half some of the most talented young men and women will do nothing but entertain you. So sit back, relax, and give a big hand to,” he paused and lifted an arm, “The Diamondaires.”

The band began to play, Plesa doffed his skimmer hat, and the curtain swung open.

Center stage was taken up by a giant mirrored staircase. Bare-breasted women with feathers coming out of their heads and rumps began appearing. Men in sequined tuxedos joined them. Everybody hurried about showing off their finery in dances that seemed like choreographed running.

Between numbers the performers would run offstage and grab costumes from special racks. They’d be back in front of the audience in less than a minute while wardrobe assistants scooped up their discarded garments.

Besides the quick change artists, stagehands, sound men, and electricians ran back and forth in organized chaos. Diamond had to move three times to avoid getting trampled.

The dozen dress dancers who had been through four costume changes in the first half hour got a chance to breathe when the comedian came on. Dapper in a black tuxedo, Tony Morain warmed up the crowd with jokes from across the USA.

“You know what the difference is between Vegas and yogurt?” Pause. “Yogurt has culture.”

Laughter.

“Anyone here from Los Angeles?”

Loud cheers.

“I thought I saw gold chains shining out there. But seriously, you know why El Lay is like a granola bar?” Pause. “If you take away the fruits and the nuts all that’s left are the flakes.”

More laughter.

“New York?”

A couple of loud yells.

“Don’t mug me, please. You know, in New York, trust is just a name on a bank.”

Laughter, cheers, and applause.

A well-endowed woman wearing only a G-string brought out a unicycle and four bowling pins.

Morain made a couple of jokes about her outstanding attributes, then climbed on the cycle and began juggling.

“I used to be an accountant. I started juggling books. The IRS said my work was funny. So here I am.”

Rapid fire, perfectly timed, Morain kept the crowd chuckling for fifteen minutes.

Breathing hard at the end of his routine, he said, “But you’re not here to see some good-looking guy make jokes. I know what you want. Bring on the boobs.”

He left the stage while the applause was still echoing in the showroom. The curtain opened wide and the stage was filled with a re-creation of Columbus discovering America, complete with glittering teepees, a mock galleon, and real horses. The men played the Spaniards. The loincloth-clad women played the Indians.

After the final chorus of “America,” the curtain closed and Plesa sauntered out.

“Aren’t we having a great time?” he asked, with his thousand-kilowatt smile.

The crowd cheered and clapped their hands.

“We love you,” he said. “We love you all. And as a special added attraction, because you’ve been such a wonderful audience, we now present,

in her first Las Vegas engagement, the talented, the charming, the sexy Miss Fifi La Roche.”

The curtain parted and there she was, bathed in an amber spotlight and clad in her skimpy cowgirl outfit. Behind her was a backdrop of a western town. Two palomino horses pulled a buckboard out and she began singing *Red River Valley*.

The man on the buckboard looked at her wistfully.

As Fifi continued with the song, her voice caught twice. She nearly slipped in a pile of fresh dung after one of the horses relieved himself. But she kept her balance and went on with the show. By her final number— *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*—the stage was filled with a dozen male and female acrobats, eight topless dancers, fifteen showgirls, and as many dress dancers. A monster yellow ribbon was lowered and the women tied smaller

versions around their necks as Fifi completed the song.

When the curtain closed the applause was polite, but not as enthusiastic as it had been for the comedian. Diamond was pounding his hands together long after everyone else had stopped.

Fifi came off stage and Diamond tried to embrace her.

“The costume,” she said, pushing him away. “You’ll ruin it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, but she kept him at arm’s distance.

She was panting lightly. “How was I?”

“The greatest.”

“Really? Do you think so?”

“Really. You knocked ‘em dead.”

“It didn’t sound that way.”

Tweed appeared. “You missed your cue twice and your kicks looked like you’d pulled a hamstring. But considering the time constraints and your own limitations it wasn’t as bad as it might have been.”

Diamond glared at the choreographer.

“Now go back to the dressing room and get out of that outfit before your boyfriend here spills beer on it,” Tweed said.

Fifi nodded obediently and started back to the dressing room with Diamond at her heels. He admired the view.

She hesitated at the dressing room door. “They gave me such a hard time before the show,” she said. She drew herself up and put on a haughty face before stepping into the room packed with her former peers.

“Look who’s here,” Angie said as Fifi and Diamond entered. “It’s Annie Oakley and her friend.”

Fifi strode to a vacant table and began undressing. Diamond tried looking elsewhere but he was surrounded by bare female flesh.

Angie noticed his discomfort and came over.

“Could you help me zip up big fella?” she asked, her nearly bare buttock brushing against him.

Several of the women giggled as Diamond fumbled with the fastener.

“Up to your old tricks, Angie?” Fifi said. “You still hooking on the side?”

Angie spun on her. “Aren’t we the fancy lady. You still lifting money out of purses or you just stealing wallets now?”

“She don’t need to steal. She’s a superstar,” one of the other women said sarcastically.

“Talent will show,” Fifi said.

“I got more talent in my toenails than you got in your whole body,” the woman responded. “I don’t have a sugar daddy like you.”

Sharp words flew like darts in a British pub, maligning appearances, boyfriends, and sexual preferences. When Fifi called Angie a “flat-chested, flat-backed, two-bit bitch,” the woman threw an empty soda glass that missed Fifi and shattered one of the mirrors.

“That’s seven more years of bad luck,” Fifi said. “And you deserve every day of it.”

“Ladies, ladies,” Diamond yelled. “Calm down, you—”

“Stay out of this,” Angie said.

“Don’t tell him what to do,” Fifi said, dressed and getting up to leave.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Fifi and Angie began swinging. The crowd egged Angie on. Diamond got between the two women and tried to find a place to grab them without getting intimate.

He finally succeeded in separating them. He took Fifi’s arm and hauled her out sputtering.

“My outfit’s still in there,” she said.

Diamond went back in. Fifi’s clothes were lying on the floor, torn in several places. He glanced around. The women avoided his fiery eyes.

“Just because you’re friends with the boss you don’t got the right to truck in here any time you want,” a woman mumbled.

“I wanted to protect her,” Diamond said, throwing his head toward where Fifi waited. “She obviously needs it. From her former friends.”

“She never was our friend,” the woman said.

He picked up the costume and walked out.

After returning the garments to an annoyed wardrobe mistress, the couple went to the Diamond Suite.

“I hate them. I hate them. I hate them,” Fifi fumed.

“It’s jealousy, doll. Don’t let it get to you.”

“I don’t want to ever see them again.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want a private dressing room.”

“I’ll talk to Tex.”

“Promise me you’ll get me a private dressing room?”

“I can’t promise. I’ll talk to him.”

Unsatisfied, she stormed around the suite. “I don’t belong here anyway. I

should be in Hollywood. I took a bunch of pictures once. The photographer said the camera was good to my face.”

“Til be good to the whole package.”

“I have talent,” she said, not hearing him. “I don’t want to have to sing and dance the rest of my life. Especially here. They’ll always undercut me. Like that horse taking a crap in the middle of my number. They got trainers who make sure that doesn’t happen. I want to go where I’m appreciated. I want to go to Hollywood. I want to be in the movies.”

“Soon as I finish up here we’ll go back to Los Angeles and S66 about that.”

“I want to go tonight.”

“Dollface, you know Red Diamond always finishes his job.”

She stepped up to him and gave him a long kiss, probing his mouth with a tongue that was slow and sure.

“C’m on, Red honey. Don’t you want your little Fifi to be happy?” she asked as they came up for air.

“More than anything. But until Rocco’s out of the picture we’re gonna have problems. And I don’t know about this film stuff. I don’t want you out shooting spectaculars full-time. Who’s gonna take care of the house? And the kids?”

“What house? What kids?”

“The house we’re gonna get. Maybe in Bay City, right by the beach.”

“What kids?”

“The kids we’re gonna have,” he said, giving her derriere a tender squeeze. “Three or four little ones. A house ain’t a home without the pitter-patter of little feet.”

“Little feet? What about stretch marks? I’ve got a career to think of. Let’s take the money you’ve made and go to Hollywood.”

“The money stays under the mattress until I finish this case,” he said firmly.

“I need to get to the studios. I know I can make it.”

After a few minutes of talking, but not communicating, Fifi threw herself down on the couch. “I’m beat.”

“We’ve got to celebrate your performance,” he said.

“How?”

He joined her on the couch and pressed his lips to hers. She twisted away.

“Not now,” she said. “I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“It’s the best way to take your mind off your troubles.”

His hands wandered over her lush terrain, enjoying the hills, the plains, and the valleys. His mouth bore down again and she didn’t resist. Her clothes disappeared faster than a honeymooning couple. He put on his matching birthday suit and they got down to business.

Fifi moaned. Diamond grunted. The doorbell rang.

He got up quickly, grabbing his .38 from the table. He pulled his pants on

and went to the door. Through the peephole he saw a forest of flowers. He cracked the door open. The delivery boy's smile wilted when he saw Diamond's .38.

"Flowers for Miss Fifi," he said, handing the foliage to Diamond and taking off without waiting for a tip.

The P.I. shut the door and brought the bouquet to where Fifi lay.

She read the card that was attached. I enjoyed your performance. You'd enjoy mine. Joe. Room 439, it read.

Fifi giggled and Diamond tore the card up.

"The nerve of that bum," he said, waving the .38. "I ought to go down there and show him my performance. Hell need new teeth."

"Awww. You're jealous," Fifi said, stroking Diamond's brow. "That's sweet. Don't worry, I'm yours. And you're going to take your little Fifi away from here. Right?"

Her hand moved from his face down to his fly and she undid him. Within seconds they were back in position. It was sweeter than honeysuckle wine, more intoxicating than a fifth of bourbon.

"Ohhh, Red, you're the—"

The doorbell rang, Diamond grabbed his gun and his pants, and stormed to the door. He saw a bunch of roses through the peephole.

He yanked the portal open, seized the bouquet from the startled delivery boy, and slammed the door.

"I admired you from afar. Id like to admire you up close," the note read. It was signed Fred. Room 732.

Fifi sniffed the roses while Diamond tore up the card. The pieces fluttered to the floor like busted dreams.

"Isn't it wonderful? All these fans," she said.

Tans? They're a bunch of dirty old men."

"How do you know they're old?" she said teasingly. "That's why you have to take me to Hollywood. It'd be different."

"I'm gonna have them put a guard by the elevator and stop this right now."

"Please don't. I get a kick out of it."

"You get a kick out of it? Getting dirty notes from creeps?"

"Not the notes. The flowers. It means they felt something."

"I know what they felt," Diamond said, slamming his fist into his palm. I'm gonna let them feel something else, sending that kind of stuff to Red Diamond's girl."

"They don't know I'm yours," she said. "But I do."

He returned to her embrace. His pants were around his ankles when the bell rang again.

Muttering under his breath, he pulled his pants up and marched back to the door.

He opened it and reached for the flowers. A fist caught his jaw and sent

him flying back.

Babe came in with a bunch of flowers in one hand and a .45 in the other. He dropped the bouquet. Red would've preferred him dropping the roscoe. It wouldn't have mattered much. Flip was right behind Babe with a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. The gun had little charm but a lot of persuasive power.

"Hubba, hubba, what have we got here?" Flip chirped, leering at the naked Fifi. "The boss sure knows how to pick his meat."

Diamond took a step toward Flip and Babe laid a paw on the P.I.'s chest. "Don't get no ideas."

Fifi sat up, trying to cover her body with her hands. It only made her look more vulnerable.

"We got orders to take you back to Moe's place," Flip said in his distinctive falsetto. "But I don't think the boss would mind if we was a few minutes late." He flicked his tongue across his lips.

Diamond charged and Babe knocked him down with a swing of the .45.

"We got orders to bring you back alive, shamus," Flip said. "But don't push your luck."

Diamond's .38 was lying near Fifi but she was oblivious to the weapon. She was impaled by Flip's stare.

The P.I. got up and rushed Babe. It was like banging heads with a statue.

Diamond let one of Babe's punches carry him backward until he was a few feet from his gal and his gat.

The gunmen moved toward them.

"I always wanted to try you out," Flip said to Fifi. "But you wouldn't give me a tumble. You were gonna tell Moe. Now he don't care what happens to you."

Babe chortled sadistically. The thugs' eyes were on Fifi, who was trying to cower into the couch. Their guns were pointed at Diamond in a lackluster way.

"Get ready for a rough ride, bitch," Flip said, lowering his shotgun and reaching for his zipper.

Diamond braced himself to jump for his gun. Babe saw the movement and lined his .45 up with the P.I.'s chest. Red knew he couldn't make it but he'd have to try.

The door crashed open.

"Police! Freeze!" Saint shouted, framed in the doorway in a classic combat firing stance.

Babe swung his .45 and Saint's gun cracked. Diamond dove for his weapon as Flip lifted the shotgun. Babe's fingers jerked spasmodically on the trigger and sent a few rounds flying. Flip had the shotgun pointed in Saint's general direction. It would've been enough to retire the cop on the spot but Diamond's .38 turned the killer into a killee.

The score stood at Good Guys-2, Hoods-O. Fifi began to scream, a loud piercing wail that didn't stop even when Red took her in his arms.

Saint called the station. While they were waiting, the cop explained he had been coming by to warn Diamond about a tip he had gotten from an informant. Greenberg had acted quicker than Saint expected and when the cop heard Flip's voice, he came in with gun blazing.

"I appreciate that," Diamond said.

"You're not going to appreciate what I say next. I'm putting you and the girl under house arrest."

"What?"

"I'll hold you as material witnesses or whatever I have to do if you don't cooperate. Maybe acting as an investigator without a Nevada license. We got too many homicides in this town. We don't need more trouble. And if you go after Greenberg, you're going to wind up dead."

"You're all heart."

There was a knock at the door and Saint admitted the troop that spends their time looking at dead bodies.

It didn't take the deputy medical examiner long to decide that Babe and Flip had pulled their final shakedown. The police photographer, fingerprint man, and a couple of other technicians preserved the scene.

Since Saint had been a witness to the shootout, the fuss was just routine. Although Saint was not popular with his brothers in blue, the idea of anyone taking a shot at a cop outweighed other considerations.

The bodies were carted out, with chalk lines left where they had been. The guns were sealed in plastic, marked for identification, and laid out on a counter.

Tex came up with the house doctor, who gave Fifi a sedative and put her to bed.

"Can you get a few of Rosie's Raiders to baby-sit Fifi?" Diamond asked Evans when he got him off to one side.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Evans said. "Where you going?"

"To get some fresh air. But keep it under your hat."

Tex agreed and Diamond drifted casually through the crowd to where the guns lay. When no one was watching, he picked up his gun and hid it under his jacket. He covertly got a box of bullets out of a drawer, grabbed his hat, and walked briskly out of the room.

He nodded confidently at the cop posted in the hall and took the elevator to the garage.

Five bucks slipped to the attendant and Diamond knew which car the killers had come in. The key was in the ignition. When the valet went to move another auto, the P.I. got behind the wheel of the hoods' car and took off.

He felt good. His exit had been smooth. There were two less punks in the world. The tires rubbed the road and moved him onward. He was on his way to a showdown with Rocco.

There could be no doubt that Rocco was behind the summons. Greenberg was a flunky front man. It was time to go one-on-one with the master killer



himself, a man for whom murder was as difficult as flossing his teeth...

*I could see only the back of the big chair behind the desk. It was blood red leather, deeper in color than the stream that dribbled from the corner of my mouth.*

*Two hoods held my arms. I felt like I'd been Joe Louis's punching bag. There were parts of me that weren't sore but I didn't know where they were.*

*Rocco's goons had taken their time. With blackjacks, fists, feet, and rubber hoses. I hadn't cracked. They didn't know where I'd stashed Fifi..*

*So the Lord High Executioner himself wanted to see me. I was honored. I was too much for the hired help.*

*The chair spun slowly and there he was. The man who Al Capone called "Sir." Who Dillinger gave half his take to. A guy with the warmth of Genghis Khan, without the charm.*

*"You don't look so hot, peeper," Rocco said. He puffed on a cigar that wasn't as thick as a baseball bat.*

*I spat blood onto his desk. "I think I'm comin' down with a cold."*

*Rocco's thin lips parted in a grimace that was supposed to be a smile.*

*"A real tough guy. You know what I do to tough guys? I stuff'em," Rocco said. He gestured with his cigar to the head of an unlucky deer that was mounted on the far wall, along with a couple of moose, a lion, and a bear.*

*"Thanks, but I ate already."*

*The hoods jerked my arms and gave me a new definition of pain.*

*"I think you need a lesson," Rocco said.*

*Savoring every moment, he waddled toward me, an evil ugly animal about to play with its prey.*

*I slumped. As the hoods struggled to lift me, I spat blood in their faces. They let go and I began flailing with the energy I'd kept on hold.*

*My punches were sloppy but they did their job. I got my hand on the heavy glass ashtray from Rocco's desk and sent the goons to forty winks-land.*

*Rocco grabbed for the gun in his desk drawer....*

Marks had done a nice job preserving that moment, Red thought. But the reverie had to end. He was getting near Greenberg's place and he didn't have a plan. All he knew was that Rocco was there, and he had to get him.

## Chapter Seventeen

Between the mountains and New Forest Drive, where the tract homes ended with no forest in sight, was a flat wasteland of junkyards and cement company silos. By the time he turned onto Buffalo Drive, the only man-made fixtures were the power lines paralleling the road.

He killed his lights. Gravel and small rocks crunched under his wheels. The car complained as he bounced in and out of chuckholes.

He drove down a dirt road past the sign warning PRIVATE-NO TRESPASSERS. He came to a wrought iron gate that locked thick enough to withstand anything short of a Sherman tank. It was attached to heavy brick pillars with a brass plate bearing the letters M.G. The property was ringed by a cyclone fence with barbed wire and razor-ribbon topping. An intercom was mounted on the left-hand brick post.

"It's Flip," Diamond said into the box, doing his best imitation of the dead killer's squeaky falsetto.

"It took you guys long enough," a man answered. There was an electronic hum and the gate swung open.

The P.I. drove down an asphalt roadway about as long as the Hollywood Freeway. Date palms and Joshua trees limited his view.

He drove further. There were no guards. Greenberg was cocky. He hadn't expected Babe and Flip to fail. And no one would dare to breach his security. No one but Red Diamond.

The main house was an impressive sight. High-intensity sodium lights kept the dark desert night off the hacienda-style house. It looked big enough to house the Mexican Army and have room left over for a few hundred *federales*.

Diamond parked the car and crept up to the window. A half-dozen men were sitting around the living room. Red recognized Greenberg, Van Houton and his bodyguard Mike Gregory, and Braun, the former Ace of Diamonds security chief. The other two looked like the hired muscle found in mobbed-up bars.

They had brandy snifters in their hands and amazed expressions on their faces when Red sauntered in. The logs in the walk-in fireplace crackled.

"Hey guys, can I join the party?" Diamond asked. He wagged his .38. "Here's my invitation."

A Thompson lay arm's distance from Gregory.

"Grab the chatter gun by the butt and kick it over here," Diamond ordered. "Real careful. We don't want it to go off."

Gregory scowled but did as he was told. Red picked up the Thompson and holstered his own gun.

"I hear you guys wanted to talk to me so I dropped in," he said.

"What do you want?" Greenberg asked.

‘To talk. First off, where’s Rocco?’

‘Who?’

‘Don’t play dumb. I know he’s around here.’

‘I don’t know anybody named Rocco,’ Greenberg said.

‘We’ll see. What’s that?’ Diamond asked, pointing to a sheaf of papers lying on a wooden coffee table in front of Van Houton.

‘Nothing,’ the South African sneered, moving quickly to retrieve the documents.

Diamond stepped in and rapped the barrel of the Thompson on Van Houton’s hand. Gregory started to get up and Diamond swung the weapon to cover him.

‘You punks better watch it or I’m gonna start playing this Chicago typewriter,’ the P.I. said.

When Diamond tucked the papers in his jacket, Gregory lunged. The P.I. staggered backward, his finger squeezing the Thompson’s trigger. The gun began talking and the house got instant ventilation.

The other men joined the fray. Diamond swung the gun like a club. His enemies kept getting in each other’s way and no one was able to land a solid blow.

‘What’s going on?’ a new voice shouted from the stairway. An Aryan-looking man with a pump-action shotgun came running.

‘It’s Diamond. Get him,’ Greenberg yelled.

Red heard footsteps pounding down the stairs. He wriggled free of the pile and began crawling to the door. Gregory jumped up and prepared to come down on him with steel-toed paratrooper boots. A spray from the Thompson sent the bodyguard to oblivion.

The Aryan with the shotgun fired a blast over Diamond’s head. His fedora was blown away in a buckshot breeze. He tickled the Thompson’s trigger.

It took a fraction of a second for Red to realize the gun wasn’t kicking in his hands. Before he could get to his .38, he was kissing close to two shotguns and a 30-30 rifle.

Damn automatic weapons, Red thought as two men lifted him roughly and slammed him down onto a hard wooden chair. Someone else got some rope and he was lashed into place.

Less than five minutes had passed since he entered.

Greenberg was literally foaming at the mouth. Spittle dripped down on his pale yellow Lacoste shirt. The casino owner was not very big, but what he lacked in size he made up for in fury. He smacked Red until the P.I. felt like he’d stuck his head in a beehive.

‘This is going to be a pleasure,’ Greenberg said, his face nearly as red as Diamond’s. ‘You’re going to die. It may take days. And I’ll be watching every second.’

‘Howzabout we let bygones be bygones?’ Diamond suggested.

Greenberg’s spittle bubbled and he smacked him again. ‘You nearly

ruined everything.”

“That’s right,” Van Houton said, stepping in and planting a list in the P.I.’s stomach. “A billion-dollar deal. More money than you could ever imagine.”

“What’s that?” Diamond gasped.

“Don’t tell him,” Greenberg said.

“Why not?” Van Houton asked. “He’s not going to tell anybody.”

Greenberg shrugged and looked uneasy.

“Gold. Silver,” Van Houton said. “Do you know what the Comstock Lode is?”

“Yeah. It’s the big claim found up near Virginia City,” Diamond said. “More than a half billion’s been taken out of there.”

“You’re not as stupid as you look,” Van Houton said.

“Thanks tons.”

“Tons is right,” Van Houton said. “A vein twice as rich as the Comstock Lode runs through Las Vegas. Deeper than ever mined before.”

“No one has ever had the foresight and resources to get it out,” Greenberg piped in. “But we’re going to drive everybody out and make millions.”

“You’re nuts,” Diamond said. “The casinos make more than that. It don’t pay.”

“The casinos belong to other people,” Van Houton said. “The gold will be mine. Everyone in my family has made money in mining. Diamonds, gold, silver, uranium. I was the black sheep. Worth only a million or so. Now I’ll show them.”

“You got a screw loose,” Diamond said. “Maybe a few. How come no one else has ever gone after it? There’s no gold there.”

“Shut up,” Greenberg said, hitting Diamond again.

“Not true,” Van Houton said smugly. “We had a leading expert, Dr. Felix Goode, do a rather detailed study. The minerals are well within reach.”

Goode? The name was vaguely familiar to Red. Greenberg interrupted his attempted recall by grabbing Diamond’s hair.

“Shut up! You’re trying to confuse him,” Greenberg screamed in Diamond’s face, showering him with spittle.

“But you’re not confused, are you Moe?” Diamond asked. “Did you bring this guy Goode in?”

“Yes he did,” Van Houton answered. “But I checked his credentials thoroughly. He’s most reputable.”

“Don’t let him con you,” Greenberg said, jerking Diamond’s hair.

Con. Con man. Dr. Felix Goode, also known as Sheik Abu Ben Diba and James Thursby.

“Was Goode a fat guy? Snappy dresser?” Diamond asked.

Greenberg put his hand over Diamond’s mouth. The P.I. bit down hard. Greenberg screamed.

“He doesn’t want me to tell you you’ve been had, sonny boy,” Diamond

said. "Goode is a con man with more names than the phone book. Moe's been playing you for a chump."

Greenberg moved to the fireplace and grabbed a hot poker.

"Let him finish," Van Houton said.

"It's a lie. I tell you, it's a lie," Greenberg said.

"Look at him," Diamond said to Van Houton. "All set to finish me off before I can tell you the truth. I thought we was going to talk for days."

Greenberg lifted the poker above his head.

"Drop it," Van Houton ordered, the .32 in his grip a forceful persuader.

"It's a trick," Greenberg said. "We're close, so close. You'll make millions. Think of the people who laughed at you, how they'll eat their words. Remember that sample Goode got us? And what the assayer said?"

"Bring in your own experts," Diamond urged the South African. "Moe's using you in a power play with the wiseguys. Once he gets his way—"

Van Houton fired as Greenberg swung. The bullet hit the casino owner in the shoulder. The poker seared Diamond's hair as it made like Newton's apple.

Braun shot Van Houton. The Aryan shot Braun. Someone else shot the Aryan. The smell of cordite filled the room as the killers settled their differences.

When the smoke cleared, Greenberg and two of his men were the winners.

"You ruined it," Greenberg screamed at Diamond while one of his men patched up his arm. "You'll pay. You'll watch the girl you stole from me die. Then it will be your turn. You'll beg for death. Now where is she?"

"Moe, I decided. You're not a nice person," Diamond said. "Rocco tried finding that out before. You know what it got him."

"Rocco?"

"Sure, Rocco, the guy whose boots you kiss. Don't play dumb with me. I'm not some South African rich boy that was born yesterday."

"Where's the girl?"

"Didn't Rocco tell you how he tried? How we shot it out and he wound up escaping from the hospital?"

Greenberg picked up the poker and put it in the fireplace. When he brought it back, the tip glowed like a demon sun.

"No more talk about Rocco," he growled. "You tell me where the girl is or I fry your eyes. Then your balls. Understand?"

"Who's writing your scripts? We need to get you some new material."

Greenberg touched the poker to Diamond's cheek. The P.I. tried not to cry out. He failed.

"No more kidding around, smart mouth," Greenberg said, smiling for the first time since Red arrived.

A cavalry bugle blew.

"What was that?" Greenberg asked.

“The TV?” one of his henchmen suggested.

Glass shattered and there was a thumping noise.

Greenberg spun as more glass shattered, and they all cried and coughed.

“Tear gas!” the third man choked.

A bugle blew “Charge” and the front door was smashed open. Guns began going off. Diamond kicked over the chair he was tied to.

Gas mask-clad figures stormed in. In the midst was an unmistakable figure, his Stetson nearly getting knocked off as he came through the doorway with six-guns blazing. And despite the gas mask, Red recognized Rosie’s form as she let loose a blast from a short-barreled shotgun.

Greenberg’s two thugs were gasping for air but they kept firing. Greenberg was down on the ground. Only Diamond could see him as he fumbled to attach a fresh drum to the Thompson.

Red rolled until his bound hands were near the hot poker. He touched them to the metal, burning flesh and hemp. His hands were freed as Greenberg lifted the now loaded machine gun.

As Greenberg trained the weapon on Rosie’s Raiders, Diamond brought the poker down on his head, splitting his skull like an overripe melon.

One of Greenberg’s surviving aides caught a bullet in the head and the other decided it was time for the white flag.

“Look for Rocco,” Diamond croaked, his eyes streaming from the tear gas. Someone handed him a gas mask.

Several of Rosie’s Raiders swept through the house while others got the air conditioners pumping out the cordite-and-tear-gas-scented clouds. None of the Raiders were injured.

Diamond tried to get up but Rosie shoved him gently back down. She motioned for one of the Raiders. “This is Rusty Steele,” she said. “He’s got paramedic training. You take it easy.”

Steele cleaned Red’s cuts and burns. After studying Diamond’s pupils, he said, “I think you’ve got a mild concussion. We better get you out of here.”

“Rocco?”

“There’s nobody else in the house,” Rosie said.

Tex came over. “How’s it going, hombre?” he asked.

“I been better, I been worse,” Diamond said.

“I reckoned you’d come out here and try and have all the fun yourself,” Tex said. “This beats the gunfight at the O.K. Corral.”

“I’m glad you came,” Diamond said.

“We’ve got to get him out of here,” Steele told Evans. “He needs rest and observation.”

“A hospital?” Tex asked.

“No,” Diamond said. “I ain’t that bad.”

“I agree,” Steele said. “Most likely he’ll be fine.”

“Well, you take him back to the hotel,” Evans said. “I’ll take care of the law.”

Steele helped Diamond up and Rosie tucked his .38 into his holster. She gave him a concerned smile, and a tender kiss.

The scene was blurry for Red. He saw the vans his rescuers had come in and the tow truck they used to tear down the front gate. He felt himself being lifted into one of the vans, and the vehicle moving as Steele put it into gear.

Diamond lay on blankets in the back of the van and gathered his strength. Steele periodically called back to make sure he was awake.

Red heard the sirens as they neared the Ace of Diamonds. The garage was filled with police and fire vehicles. Their flashing lights were brighter than the signs on the Strip.

Red's first thought was that an arsonist had struck again. Although a crowd had gathered, it didn't look like an evacuation. The mumbling mob parted like a Brylcream man's hair when the P.I. began barreling forward. Steele tried to put the brakes on him, but the scarred and determined P.I. kept on moving. The uniformed cop guarding the police barricade put up his arms to stop Diamond. Their collision was averted when Saint spotted him and ordered the officer to let him through.

"I'm sorry," Saint said.

"I ain't in as bad shape as I look."

"Not for that. I had no idea."

"About what?"

Saint didn't answer. He looked over to the center of the show—the charred remains of an unrecognizable sedan.

"I had no idea she'd do it," the cop said. "She slipped out the way you did."

The moment froze in time. The lights, the noise, the smells, everything, like a stuck frame in a movie projector. And then the image began to burn.

"Fifi?"

Saint stood mute. Diamond grabbed the cop's shoulder and shook him.

The veteran cop's voice was choked with rage and sorrow. "She got into your rented car. Tried to drive off. Plastic explosive wired to the ignition. Thousands of diamond-shaped darts. She died quickly."

"Nooooooooo!" Diamond screamed. He began swinging wildly. Saint parried the blows easily. A couple of uniformed officers grabbed the P.I. roughly and were about to give him the usual treatment awarded cop-fighters.

"Leave him alone," Saint barked. The officers held Diamond but didn't hit him.

"Are you okay?" the lieutenant asked.

Diamond's head hung limply on his chest. He gave a weak nod. Saint waved his hand and the cops released him.

"I want to see the body," Diamond said.

"There's nothing to see. They're still collecting it, I mean her."

Steele had elbowed his way to their side. "Lieutenant, Mr. Diamond has had a bad time. I'd like to take him upstairs and put him to bed."

“Who are you?” Saint demanded.

“Rusty Steele. I’m with casino security,” he said, producing identification. Saint glanced at it and asked, “How did Red get beat up like that?”

“He was in an accident. Mr. Evans will explain.”

“Listen Steele, I’m putting Diamond in your custody. I’m trusting you both, even though he walked out on me once tonight. If he isn’t available for questioning tomorrow morning, you’re both up a creek. Know what I mean?”

“Yes sir, and thank you.”

Steele led the lifeless Diamond from the scene, up to the suite, and sat him down on the couch.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Fifi.”

“I’m going to get you some ice to keep that swelling down. Stay here.”

Steele walked away.

Diamond shut his eyes and the events of the night exploded inside his eyelids.

Guns. Shots. Pain. Blood. Screams. Bodies. Explosion. Fifi. Fifi.

I want to get in my cab and go home, Red thought. What? Cab? To Milly. Milly who? Divorce. Sean and Melonie. The kids. Whose kids? Marriage. Long Island. House. Assets. Dependents. Dependence. Descendents. Defendants.

Lost between Simon Jaffe and Red Diamond, he heard Steele say, “We’re out of ice. I’m going down the hall to get a bucket.”

Why had Fifi gone out? A call, maybe, from someone telling her that Red needed her. That would bring her on the double. The sedative.

He got up and wobbled to the closet. Her belongings were gone. It didn’t make sense.

He moved around the suite, not sure what to do with himself. Her scent was still in the air along with the smells of blood and cordite from the gun battle with Babe and Flip. Their chalk outlines remained.

She would’ve been dopey. They could’ve fooled her, thinking she was going to meet Red. Instead she’d met the Grim Reaper.

Gulo. The diamond shaped anti-personnel darts. It had to be his trademark. And he’d gotten her. Fifi was gone. Red Diamond was just another lonely private eye, destined for a cluttered bachelor apartment with empty booze bottles on the floor. The hub his life spun around was gone.

The doorbell rang and he moved with leaden feet to answer it. There was no reason to hurry anymore, no reason for anything. He felt a lone tear begin to trickle down his cheek.

There was one emotion stronger than his sorrow. Hate. He would get his revenge on Rocco and Gulo. They would pay. He would happily die if he could collect that debt.

He was wiping the tear from his eye as he opened the door. His upraised arm saved his life. It wasn’t Steele with the ice. It was Gulo with cold steel.



The jewel-encrusted dagger plunged downward. Because of his arm, instead of catching Red in the throat, it pierced his left forearm. The blade was buried so deep it was pulled from the killer's hand, stuck in the P.I.'s flesh. The two men fell backward into the apartment. They rolled and scuffled, landing punches wherever and whenever they could.

Diamond had a few inches and twenty pounds on Gulo. The hit man had a lifetime of experience. Both men were fighting for their lives. They thrashed and flailed, knocking over tables, breaking lamps, and smashing into furniture. Diamond's blood left a dark trail.

Gulo got up and kicked. Red caught his leg and the assassin fell. The P.I. pounced, but Gulo rolled aside. Red's injured arm throbbed with every move. Gulo struggled to get his hands on the purloined French knife, to twist it in deeper or jerk it free.

They rolled into the hot tub and the land war became a sea battle—gasping and punching and fighting to hold each other under the surface. The killer grabbed him in a tenacious pit-bull headlock and shoved Diamond's face underwater.

Red weakened and his life flashed before him. Driving a cab. Breakdown. Times Square. Dead bodies. Mr. Brown's gang war. More dead bodies. Manfred's daughters. Vargas. Even more dead bodies.

Red was tired, an overweight marathon dancer in too-tight shoes. He needed a few minutes rest. Just a few minutes. Gulo was winning. The search for Fifi could wait. Fifi. Fifi. Fifi!

The hit man wasn't prepared for Diamond's manic burst of energy. Red got his head above water and gulped in great gasps of air. He was willing to die, but Gulo would have to go first. He pulled his right arm free. Two of his fingers found Gulo's eyes and the hit man screamed. Water sloshed over the rim as the tide turned. His left arm was nearly useless, but Diamond hit Gulo with a flurry of hard jabs.

Gulo refused to give up. He swung blindly, only one in three punches connecting. The P.I. grabbed Gulo's head and slammed it into the side of the tub. Once, twice, again and again. At some point Red realized he was wasting his energy. Gulo would kill no more.

The knife still embedded in his arm, dripping blood and water, Diamond staggered to the phone. He lifted the five hundred-pound headset.

"Help," he said into the mouthpiece, and then the sandman sapped him into oblivion.

## Chapter Eighteen

He was lying in a snow bank without any chill. Rocco stood over him, wearing a white tux. Fifi stood next to the villain. She was wearing a wedding gown and had a diamond ring.

"You thought you were such a smart guy," Rocco said. "You're a stupid little man in a dirty little world. You're nothing."

"Go back to your cab," Fifi said, putting her arm through Rocco's. "Give it up."

"Never," Diamond shouted. "Never. Never. Never!"

Experienced hands were holding him down. The white grew brighter. The faces blurred, then came back into focus. The nurse released him and wiped his brow with a damp wet rag. A name tag reading LINDA was pinned to her generous chest.

"He's coming around," she said.

Evans stood next to her. "I knew he was too ornery to die."

"How long I been out?" Diamond asked. His voice sounded as weak as an old man's.

"Three days. The docs said you were ready for Boot Hill. I told them if you became buzzard bait I'd take away their golf clubs."

Linda stood up. She was a brunette of staggering proportions. Her large brown eyes, the darkest spots in the room, showed genuine concern.

"Linda used to work at the casino before she became an RN," Evans said. "She's the best there is. In a whole bunch of ways."

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked Diamond, dabbing him gently with the rag. As she bent, her superstructure jiggled like a skyscraper in an earthquake.

Diamond tried shaking his head. He got dizzy.

"Take it slow, cowboy. Linda and another gal almost as purty will tend to your needs," Evans said with a lecherous wink.

Diamond did a bad job of feigning a smile.

The wounded P.I. was housed in the Tex Evans Wing of the hospital. He got the royal treatment. The solicitous hovering was interrupted only by visits from Evans, Rosie, and the police. Evans and Rosie wanted him to get well. The cops wanted a statement.

Tex put a team of lawyers in between Diamond and the cops. The frustrated lawmen wound up giving more than they were getting.

From their questions, and with information filled in by Evans and Rosie, Diamond learned that his theory was correct.

Greenberg had used the con man Thursby to trick Van Houton. The South African had supplied money and mercenaries to drive out Strip owners, believing there was a massive gold vein running under the city. It had been hokum, set up by Greenberg to force out his mob-connected brethren, and the

few innocents that remained in Las Vegas.

"I always suspected Moe was behind it," Evans said. "But I wanted you to come in and prove me right without my prodding."

When Evans visited, he talked continuously, praising Diamond and joyfully recounting the shootout at Greenberg's.

"Reservations are climbing back up," Evans said. "And the crime rate is dropping so fast we might soon be the safest place in the country. The news people are doing all sorts of stories on it."

Rosie's visits were much quieter. She sat by Diamond's bedside and held his hand.

"I suppose you'll be leaving soon," she said.

"Probably."

"No chance of you staying?"

"I doubt it."

"I think I could get attached to a guy like you," she said.

"Don't think about it," he said. "I'm poison. Look what happened to the girl I loved."

"You're feeling sorry for yourself," she said. "Think of the good that you did. The thousands of people whose lives are better because of you."

"I guess."

And they sat in silence.

When he was alone, he tried not to wallow in his misery. He thought of the many private eyes who had tougher rows to hoe.

There was Dan Fortune, with just one arm; Nat Perry, a hemophiliac who wasn't scared of killers with sharp objects; Nicholas Street, the amnesiac; Peter Quest, who's glaucoma made him virtually blind at times; Ben Bryn, whose powerful upper torso rested on a body ravaged by polio.

It didn't work. None of them had been Fifi's lover, and none of them had lost her the way he had. Only his urge to find Rocco kept him going.

On Red's eighth day in the hospital, Saint brought him the news that no charges would be pressed in any of the homicides.

"You got off lucky, Diamond," the cop said. "You took the law in your own hands and you're walking away smelling like a rose. Between you being a local hero, and Tex squeezing a lot of nuts, you can leave here without a care in the world."

"Yeah."

"And I hear your arm will be good as new in a month or so."

"Life is wonderful," Diamond said sarcastically.

Saint lifted a small, heavy satchel and handed it to Diamond. "This stuff belongs to you," the cop said. "You can thank Tex for getting it out of the property clerk so quick."

Inside was his gun and the money he had kept tucked under the mattress.

"We found the cash in the car with the woman," Saint said.

"The woman?"

“The one you were calling Fifi. Her name was Gayle Collins. We were able to make a positive ID from her teeth.”

Diamond sat up abruptly. “What?”

“Gayle Collins. You knew that, didn’t you? This Fifi stuff was a nickname?”

The P.I. was woozy from his sudden move. He lay back.

“You want the doctor?” Saint asked. “You look kind of pale.”

“No. I just need time to think.”

“I’ll be going then,” the lieutenant said. “There’s a big push going on to crack down on the troublemakers. I’ll be working a surveillance and I don’t know if I’ll be able to see you again. It’ll be a lot quieter with you gone.”

Diamond nodded.

“Don’t take any wooden nickels,” Saint said, walking briskly from the room.

Could it be possible? Red wondered. Was Fifi still alive? Had Rocco pulled a fast one, slipping this Gayle Collins into the car? Kidnapping Fifi. That was like Rocco. Luring an innocent dupe to her death to throw the P.I. off his scent. The foul stench of murder.

The lethargy that had kept Red wallowing in the hospital bed was gone. He had let them pump him full of drugs. Red Diamond, the man who ate saps for breakfast, shivs for lunch, and slugs for dinner. Lying around like Joe Blow in for a gall bladder operation.

Linda came in as he was awkwardly pulling on his pants.

“What’re you doing?” she asked.

“Putting on my drawers, angel. What’s it look like?”

“You’re supposed to stay here another couple of days,” she said, stepping up to him and taking his waistband in her hand. “Get undressed.”

“Doll, under most circumstances that would be an offer I couldn’t refuse. But I got things to do.” He gently pushed her hands away.

“Tex said I should give you some special therapy when you were feeling better.” She put her arms around him and let him feel the warmth of her body.

They locked lips. She was soft and as inviting as a mattress after a hard day hauling rocks. She gave herself without hesitation. It was Diamond who broke the clinch.

“That was nice,” he said. “Real nice. A fella could get used to that pretty quick.”

“You get back into bed and I’ll tuck you in with something special.”

Diamond reached for his shirt. “This covered by Blue Cross?”

“Did I do anything wrong?” she asked.

“You’ve got the moves down pat. I wish I had time for treatment. But I got to go. Now be a sweetheart and help me get this shirt on.”

She did. “I really shouldn’t be doing this. The doctor won’t approve. And Tex will be mad.”

He gave her a peck on the lips. “Tell them I made you do it. And I’ll make

sure Tex knows how quickly I responded to your attention.”

“If you need any T.L.C., I make house calls.”

“Just what the doctor ordered.”

She exited with an appealing bounce, not exaggerated, a woman who knew how to move like a woman, Red thought.

He slipped his gun into the holster and clipped it to his belt. More therapeutic than a gallon of antibiotics.

Evans was waiting when Red returned to the hotel.

“I heard you checked out,” Tex said. “The sawbones wasn’t treating you right?”

“They were fine. And Linda is a real peach. She can check my vitals any time. But I got to get back to L.A.”

“What’s the rush? Why don’t you stick around a piece? Things are getting cleaned up. We could use a man like you to keep the bad guys on their toes.”

“It’s something Fifi said to me. She kept talking about Hollywood. I think she was giving me a clue.”

“So it wasn’t Fifi in that car?”

“No. Rocco pulled the old switcheroo. I got to hurry before he realizes I’m wise to him.”

Evans gave him a hearty handshake and a slap on the back that nearly opened Diamond’s stitches. “What do I owe you?”

“Our account is balanced,” Diamond said, holding up the bag with the money.

“I’m sorry to see you moseying on,” Evans said.

“A guy’s gotta do what a guy’s gotta do. *Hasta la vista.*”

“Hasty banana, cowpoke. You’re one of a kind. A real ace.”

“An ace of diamonds?”

“The best suit.”

Norris was waiting outside, a round box under his arm.

“We’re truly sorry to see you leave, Mr. Diamond,” he said. “I’m to expedite your travel arrangements. Do you want to fly out today?”

“I’d rather drive,” Diamond said. “I like being behind the wheel. And I could use the time to think. Can I get a car?”

Norris nodded and they walked to the elevator. A car was ready for them down in the garage.

“Are you sure you’ll be able to drive with that?” Norris said, indicating Diamond’s injured arm.

“Piece of cake.”

Norris opened the door and Diamond slid into the red 1972 Mustang.

“Is there anything else I might do for you?” the manservant asked.

“I’m fine. Take it easy.”

“One final matter. This is for you,” Norris said, handing the box to Diamond. “With Mr. Evans’s best wishes.”

“Thanks,” the P.I. said, putting it next to the moneybag and starting the

engine. He gave a brief wave and was off.

Diamond took his time in the city, checking for tails and getting a last glimpse of the town that Bugsy built. The sun made it look clean, but old, like a fading blonde who had gotten religion, but still turned a few tricks on the side.

The car's engine hummed smoothly. There were only a few hundred miles on the odometer. But the air-conditioned air had an unpleasant smell. Gasoline and smoke. Perfume and blood.

It wasn't the car. The money that Collins had died with was on the seat next to him, the source of a stench as foul as a Chicago stockyard.

He knew what he had to do. The wheels screeched as he made a U-turn and headed back to the Ace of Diamonds. He parked and took the elevator to the office marked ROSIE WASHINGTON—CHIEF OF SECURITY.

The secretary was a beefy guy who looked like he'd be better with a machine gun than a Dictaphone. Red recognized him from the night at Greenberg's ranch. The man nodded and buzzed the P.I. into the inner office.

A surprised Rosie jumped up from behind the glass top desk where she was reviewing papers. Clad in a form fitting dress suit, she ran to Diamond and gave him a hug.

"I thought you were leaving without saying goodbye," she said tearfully.

"I'm like a bad penny. I keep turning up."

"I'm glad you did. Do you have to go?"

He nodded. "I know how you feel. It's why I was gonna check out without stopping at your desk. Like pulling off a bandage, the quicker, the less pain."

It was her turn to nod.

"I got a favor to ask," he said.

"Name it."

He handed her the satchel of cash. "There's two kids up on the north side. J.C. and Rocky. Both about fourteen, kind of skinny. Rocky's got his name tattooed on his hand." He gave her the address of the baseball field.

"The kids saved my life," Diamond continued. "And they gave me some good information. I want this money to go into a trust fund. They get it for their schooling."

"You don't want any of it?"

"To me it's dirty money. To them it might do some good. Besides, I'm a couple a grand ahead," Diamond said, patting his wallet. "And they can use it more than me."

She took the money and put it in a wall safe. "Consider it done. I'll put Rusty right on it. He felt bad about getting knocked out by Gulo."

"How's Rusty doing?"

"Fine. Only his pride was hurt."

"Give him my best," Diamond said. "Anyway, as Tex would say, I got to mosey on down the road."

“I wish you didn’t have to.”

“I do too. You take care.”

“You too,” she said stiffly. He heard a snuffle as he shut the door behind him.

He was on the road again. He opened the car windows wide and let the fresh air blow across his face. It was getting hot. By the time he hit the interstate, the stench of the money was gone.

The box Norris had handed him was still there. He pulled to the side of the road and opened it. Inside was a gray, ten-gallon Stetson, with a hatband studded with diamonds. To replace the cap you lost at the gunfight, the note from Tex read.

He put the hat on his head. A perfect fit.

Tex was a class guy. And Rosie was something special too. He had a feeling he’d be seeing them again.

He was richer than he had been when he arrived in Vegas. How many people could leave the city and say that? He’d put a few more of Rocco’s legions on ice, though he had no doubt the killers would be easy enough to replace.

It was time to go back to where he lived, the city of fallen angels. Fifi would be there. And Rocco. And a chance to settle that long overdue bill.

“Giddyap,” he said, tapping the accelerator. The horsepower under the Mustang’s hood responded.

He began singing “Don’t Fence Me In” as he galloped off. He’d reach Los Angeles in time for the sunset.

\* \* \*

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Hope you enjoyed the second in the Red Diamond series. I'm working on putting my website back up, checking my Facebook account more than once a month, and Twitter more than once a week. Though I still have my old typewriter in the attic, it feels very 21st Century.

It was fun re-reading this, the forties meets the eighties, through a 2011 perspective. No scenes with characters talking on cell phones or sipping bottled water.

I should soon have the rights back to the next couple books—*Bully!* And *An Eye for an Eye*. They're different in tone from the Diamond books. *Bully!* is lighter, a historical mystery packed with true facts about Roosevelt, who was definitely a larger than life character. How many presidents (actually at that point, an ex-president) get shot while giving a speech, get up, and finish the speech? *An Eye for an Eye* is a gritty police thriller, based very roughly on a real incident. I don't want to give it away, but will probably put the details at the end of the e-book edition.

Then there's *The Borozi Control*, a spy thriller written under the pseudonym Scott Ellis, and three Zen counterterrorist mysteries: *Overkill*, *Seize the Dragon*, and *Gunpower*. I'm working on getting the rights back on these as well.

My bio—at an early age, I was abandoned by wolves and raised by my parents. In Brooklyn, which is where I developed an early fascination with crime, a local resource, like oil in Texas. I worked in a bookstore, as a private eye, a bouncer at Studio 54, a news photographer, reporter, and freelance magazine journalist.

In mid-life, wanting to do something pro-social and a bit more stable, I earned a Masters in counseling psychology and became a therapist. Wrote a couple more mysteries: *Borderline* and *Fixation*.

It's all about a fascination with the human condition.





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